

“CONNECTING THE DOTS IN COMMUNITY”

INVESTING IN A CONGREGATIONAL COMMITMENT  
TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL  
WITHOUT GRADUATING FROM THEIR FAITH

A THESIS-PROJECT

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VOLUME ONE

BY  
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for Lisa,  
my wife and loving partner in ministry and life.  
Your support and encouragement  
mean the world to me.

for Katie, Nikki, and Joey  
I delight in you; I cherish you; you are very precious to me.  
May you each experience the ownership of your own relationship with Jesus,  
as we pass on our family faith,  
be part of a wider church family that wants to invest in you,  
to always see yourselves connecting the dots in community  
- a community that helps you grow in your love for Jesus.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project develops a model for helping students connect the dots in community. This ministry vision for the church invests in a commitment to prepare students to transition from high school without graduating from their faith. Included in this thesis is a two-year Grad Prep Program designed to equip upper-classmen to prepare for this transition.

The bottom line of this thesis: a prepped faith is the best faith! A healthy church environment, confident family faith, and focused youth ministry can provide a significant launching pad for young believers to continue to grow in their ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. By surrounding students with a network of faith-forming fellowship (a model called a “constellation”), students begin practicing seeking out such relationships of accountability for themselves in order to gain important competencies for their future.

## INTRODUCTION

### CONNECTING THE DOTS IN COMMUNITY

“We can hope that after us, future generations will have been awakened to the need of fellowship from their childhood up, and that this will be as natural for them as our fierce independence is for us.”

– Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness*

#### **Fierce Independence:**

*Fierce* independence. Perhaps there is no better description of our approach to life – and even to Christian faith – in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Knit within our national identity is a rugged individualism and woven into our experience of “doing Church” is a focus on following Jesus “just as *I* am.” First person, singular pronouns ironically define our collective mentality. This enculturated individualism has shaped Americans, and with it, American Christians, from childhood up. A “cosmology of fragmentation,” really a sense of dis-integration instead of integration, has so dominated and confounded our culture.<sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on the state of American Christianity, this isolation mindset prevails on many levels. And one must wonder about the long-term effects of a faith lived out in such isolation, especially when it comes to our children who have in many ways been systematically removed from the nurture of cross-generational connections. These connections are, as Mark DeVries painfully relates, “the very relationships that are most likely to lead them to maturity.”<sup>2</sup>

This paper will probe behind the premise that many young Christian believers are walking away from living out an active faith in Christ as they emerge into adulthood.

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub., 1983), Kindle location 119.

<sup>2</sup> Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 36.



Perhaps you have witnessed this scenario, too. For those of us who work in the Church or are trying our best to raise our own children as faithful and strong believers, there is often a disconcerting pattern of lost faith – or at least faith on hold – for young people today.<sup>3</sup> Many adolescents, especially during their college years, are feeling *disconnected* from both Church and God. Superficiality defines many of their relationships, so emotionally many young souls feel alone. In fact, Chap Clark discovered in his research that “when feeling safe enough to admit it, every student I talked to acknowledged that loneliness is a central experience.”<sup>4</sup>

I believe, at some level, that this loneliness is the shadow side of their natural independence. This independence is made even more fierce because they perceive that the only way to survive the tough stuff of life is to do it all on their own. The irony of their hard exterior is painful, as John Powell points out, saying, “These walls and masks are measures of self-defense, and we will live behind our walls and wear our masks as long as they are needed. While it may seem to be a safer life behind these facades, it is also a lonely life.”<sup>5</sup>

Quite honestly, this is where fierce independence leads. Loneliness, isolation, and hopelessness are among the distinguishing marks in the emerging generation. John Drane maintains that the emerging generation is “rootless” and emotionally struggling, claiming that:

Because of the collapse of traditional relational networks, and the way that material success has become a culturally-approved sign of worthwhile achievement, people right across all social classes are struggling to establish

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<sup>3</sup> Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 838-39.

<sup>4</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle location 1012.

<sup>5</sup> John Powell, *Why am I Afraid to Love?* (Niles, IL: Argus Communications Co., 1967), 52.

themselves as individuals of true worth, and the extent of the personal alienation that then ensues is leading to pathological behavior patterns.<sup>6</sup>

Certainly young adults are relationally struggling on many levels, and perhaps it can be said that this is just part of the journey of life. From a faith perspective, though, this alienation has far-reaching consequences. It does not take too much imagination to picture an exodus of young people from our churches, spiritually floating without a community of faith. We can see their faces; we know their names. We so want the best for our kids and are heartbroken at the thought that we have somehow inadvertently turned our backs on a generation, just to watch them leave in droves.<sup>7</sup>

I also believe at the heart of this issue is the fact that our modern expression of Christianity has set up a generation to be lonely and fiercely independent. Perhaps it is impossible to discern all the factors at play. However, we in the Church can no longer sit idly by and just *wish* for something to change. If it is true, as theologian David Wells asserts, that we have by this profound loss of connection and community created a “disintegrated society,” how do we best respond?<sup>8</sup> As parents and church family, it must be a priority concern for us to visualize an ongoing vital faith in our children.<sup>9</sup>

I would describe a vital faith as a personal trust in Jesus that is seeking maturity in the midst of supportive relationships. For the sake of this paper, I will use terms such as discipleship, spiritual growth, formation, and faith ownership interchangeably. And for those of us who have tasted the gift of a growing journey of discipleship (spiritual

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<sup>6</sup> John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2012), Kindle locations 28–29.

<sup>7</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 72–73.

<sup>9</sup> Gordon Smith, *Transforming Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), Kindle locations 3821–25.

formation, vital faith, etc.), we know that it is in and through both our friendships with other believers and our personal walk with Jesus that we can escape loneliness and be healed.

Unfortunately, as we will determine in the groundswell of evidence that will be considered in this project, many of our young people growing up in churches and youth groups are somehow missing the mark of ongoing faith vibrancy. In *The Slow Fade*, the authors diagnose the situation by stating:

Most churches and families have programmed a finish line in youth or student ministry at twelfth grade. At church we push our seniors out the door, breathe a sigh of relief, and let them disappear for a few years. There is a mistaken assumption that they will spend the next four or five years solidifying their faith, starting careers, getting married, and showing back up at our churches when they are more “complete” adults. So we let them go ... because that is what we are supposed to do, right?<sup>10</sup>

But our faith in following Christ together never has a finish line! Each one of us always has a next step of faith – ongoing discipleship and spiritual formation; we all still have growing to do. It is so interesting to see this focus and the continual nature of our faith come up time and time again in scripture. The writer of Hebrews declares:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3, NIV)

This visual image is so captivating and hopeful! As runners following Jesus together, we are not alone! We are surrounded by cheerleaders and partners in faith, even the heroes of faith who have gone before us. (What a powerful portrayal of the role we are called to

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<sup>10</sup> Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith, *The Slow Fade* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2010), Kindle locations 139–42.

play with our own children – filling the stands and cheering them on in their faith!) But we are asked to be more than just in the stands; we are called to run with them. And as each one of us runs this race together, we are drawn to focus on a personal relationship with Jesus and to persevere through life’s highs and lows. In our world today, however, somehow the path upon which we have set our youth has many of them dropping out from the race altogether.

Can there be an awakening to something different? Can there be a change that affects our congregations, our families, and our students themselves? Jerry Bridges believes that there is a strong response needed, declaring, “This is a much needed corrective to our tendency toward an individualistic approach to the Christian life, but it does raise the question: What is biblical community? And is there a biblical basis for using the word ‘community’ in our Christian context?”<sup>11</sup> Seeking out the answers to these questions will be a central task of this paper because we cannot truly help provide the kind of encouragement that is necessary for our young people to know their need for fellowship and community if they cannot even articulate what true Christian community is all about.

As a youth pastor who has been serving students and families in local churches in the Pacific Northwest for over twenty years, I am compelled to be part of a movement that offers a different script for students. I am tired of seeing our years of relational investment, prayer, spiritual discipleship and nurture in the lives of so many being dismantled – at least in part – by the lack of a clear goal to see faith persevere. There is nothing more exciting than to see the faith of one of our students mature to the point that

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<sup>11</sup> Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), Kindle locations 83–86.

a person *owns* their faith personally and passionately. And as with any sense of ownership, she is ultimately saying, “This is MY faith! I belong to Christ and I belong to others in the Body of Christ, the Church.”

If we are not inspiring this kind of personal faith ownership with a clear understanding of this faith being anchored in community, our churches and our families are left to wonder about the stick-to-it-iveness of an active faith. There are many who identify the departure of so many of our youth as primarily an issue of faith ownership.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly this is part of the problem. Mark DeVries reflects on the issue this way:

...something was wrong with the way I was measuring success. We had succeeded in leading her (one of his students) to become a mature Christian teenager, but somehow we failed to place her on the track toward mature Christian adulthood. We were shortsighted, focusing on the short-term objective of keeping her involved and growing but forgetting the long-term goal of laying a foundation that would last for the long haul.<sup>13</sup>

“Laying a foundation that would last for the long haul.” Clearly that is our task in Christian ministry – as well as the goal of every Christian parent. Some have even called this the “bottom line” of youth ministry; not their attendance now, but their having an active faith life 10 years from now.<sup>14</sup> If a wise builder is serious about an important project, like a house, he will consider it essential to think about the durability and longevity of his project. Paul specifically speaks the vital role that calls us to play in helping to build each other up in the faith.

What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.

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<sup>12</sup> Ed Stetzer. “The Real Reasons Young Adults Drop Out of Church.” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2014/december/real-reasons-young-adults-drop-out-of-church.html> (accessed December 9, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 114.

The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward. If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames. (1 Corinthians 3:5-15, NIV)

Paul clearly conveys that God is the one who makes things grow, but each of us in our families and congregations has a role to play in nurturing something that survives. For Paul – and for us – personal faith in Christ is never meant to be disposable and it is never meant to be solo.

We in the Church (or parachurch organization or youth group) must honestly confess that we are often missing a focused plan and passion to encourage our students to keep their faith and continue growing in their faith beyond their time in youth ministry. And as parents, too, we must admit that our efforts have been sloppy (or nonexistent) in preparing our kids for the spiritual challenges that come after graduation. Truth be told, this is often when our kids also graduate from their faith.

In our churches, it seems that we are fond of preaching about spiritual community and fellowship. There are literally scores of books that cite the centrality of community to the Christian experience. Again, if we are to see the crucial value in spiritually belonging to each other in fellowship, we need to be able to share stories of real-life instances where our involvement with others has dripped with God's very presence. It seems amazing that we must find ways to doggedly broadcast something that on the surface seems pretty apparent in scripture. (In fact, there is a growing movement within our contemporary

culture that wonders if the Church is optional; with books titled *How to be a Christian without Going to Church* and *They Like Jesus But Not the Church*.) When it comes to practice, however, we have failed to display by our lives and habits convincing evidence that we have a clue what we are talking about.

It is time for this to change.

Author Phillip Yancey is transparent about his own journey of discovery of his need for fellowship in his book *Church: Why Bother?* He points to a powerful quotation from Saint John of the Cross: “The virtuous soul that is alone... is like the burning coal that is alone. It will grow colder rather than hotter.” Yancey continues:

I believe he is right. Christianity is not a purely intellectual, internal faith. It can only be lived in community. Perhaps for this reason, I have never entirely given up on church. At a deep level I sense that church contains something I desperately need. Whenever I abandon church for a time, I find that I am the one who suffers.<sup>15</sup>

In many ways, *suffering* sums up well the experience of this emerging generation; maybe in part because so many of them have given up on Church. Chap Clark labels this suffering as *abandonment*, even calling it the defining issue of this generation.<sup>16</sup> He poignantly expresses:

But as society in general moved from being a relatively stable and cohesive adult community intent on caring for the needs of the young to a free-for-all of independent and fragmented adults seeking their own survival, individual adolescents found themselves in a deepening hole of systemic rejection. This rejection, or abandonment, of adolescents is the root of the fragmentation and calloused distancing that are the hallmarks of the adolescent culture.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Phillip Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?: My Personal Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), Kindle locations 162–67.

<sup>16</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4337.

<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 624–27.

Even in the Church, Clark indicts our youth ministries for failing to properly respond to this challenge. He quotes one young girl's response after a presentation on the topic of trust. The student exclaims, "I'll tell you why I don't trust anybody at this school or my parents. Everybody is out for themselves. Teachers, coaches, parents, even my church group leaders—they are all out for themselves. Nobody gives a (expletive) about me! Nobody!"<sup>18</sup>

But this is not God's best intention for the Church! As a Christian community, we must be a trustworthy representative of a loving God who went to such great lengths to show his care for each of us. How are our hurting young people going to believe that "God so loved the world" (John 3:16, Romans 5:8, and countless other passages) and loves them too if the Church doesn't model that love? I completely agree with Philip Yancey that the church contains something that we all desperately need: a hope that is found in having faith in the person and saving act of Jesus Christ *and* a community of dear friends who share that hope with us. Throughout this paper, I will often refer to the *both/and* nature of the ownership of our faith. It is this kind of faith – relying on the grace of Jesus Christ and gathered together with others who are doing the same – that is meant to be the antidote for loneliness.

But this is not always our experience. Reflecting on the disappointment gap between what the Church is truly called to be and how it actually is, Yancey was having a conversation with a friend who was an alcoholic. He asked about the main quality missing in the local church that Alcoholics Anonymous had somehow offered. His friend sat silent for several minutes before responding. Yancey accounts, "I expected to hear a

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<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4167–69.



word like love or acceptance or, knowing him, perhaps anti-institutionalism. Instead, he said softly this one word: dependency. ‘None of us can make it on our own’ – isn’t that why Jesus came?” he explained.”<sup>19</sup> The answer is: “Yes! That is exactly why Jesus came.”

We cannot make it on our own – and we were never intended to. It is time to wake up.

### **An Awakening is Needed**

I believe we can bring a wake-up call to this generation about the vital need for fellowship, for joining together with others following Christ and growing deeply in the ownership of their faith. But to truly signal the alarm, we must recognize that there are several key players in the arena of supporting faith, and all the partners must spring into action together. The focus of this paper is written for these key players: for pastors, parents, youth workers, parachurch ministers, and concerned congregational members who share the unease about how societal pressures in the world are leaving our young abandoned and with lackluster spiritual commitment. We need to join together to truly inspire a resilient following after Jesus and help keep them from walking away from their faith. It’s time for these key players to all be on the same team to do something about it! Working together in unison, we can be committed to God’s invitation to a new narrative for this generation; a team ministry approach is the best possible youth ministry.<sup>20</sup>

With this paper, I want to articulate and prompt a shift in the way we respond to the obvious shortcomings of individualized faith. I want to then issue a challenge to those

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<sup>19</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 490.

<sup>20</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle locations 3990–94.

in positions of spiritual influence (i.e., pastors, youth pastors, parents, caring adults, and the students themselves, etc.) that we need a new paradigm for fellowship, a model for *connecting the dots in community*. This generation urgently aches for a relational reality to be found in a faith formed by fellowship that can set a blueprint for their future. Such a tangible model can later lead them to build for themselves their own network of spiritual support in an ongoing way.

Faith ownership truly materializes when young people take responsibility for their own discipleship and growth. In many ways, this is the singular unique undertaking of this thesis. There is presently a number of books that reflect much research regarding the loss of faith during this season of life, as well as growing movement that is calling for greater cooperation between churches and families to supporting faith the of our young ones.

However, it is my contention that we must go beyond simply bemoaning these dynamics. We must be motivated by the evidence to do something. And while the partnership of churches and families is absolutely essential to establish the healthiest environment for inspiring faith endurance, this partnership alone does not go far enough.

To truly prepare our students to own their faith personally and anchor that faith in community, a specific model is needed. The title of this model will be “connecting the dots in community” and will draw upon a several other styles of networking and support. This model communicates the high value of relationships, as does all good youth ministry. However, it is truly innovative in this way: through the process of equipping our students while they are present in our ministry, they will be specifically trained and prepared to create their own web of support wherever they may find themselves after

high school. This model will take into account the very cultural dynamics explored in this paper, must be grounded in a faithful interpretation of biblical community, and, at the same time be flexible enough to allow for a custom design within each congregation's particular ministry context. In my own church, this is the way that we are coaching our students (in what we will describe as our Grad Prep Program). And more importantly, we are also doing all that we can to get the entire church invested behind this strategy.

In trying to best summarize the way in which other authors examine the growing concerns about a missing generation, several key works will be investigated in this paper as part of the literary review. While there are a variety of approaches to analyzing this phenomenon, there is ample consensus on gravity of the situation. Commenting on the harsh reality and challenges of this contemporary situation, Jonathan McKee and David R. Smith emphasize:

Millions of teenagers are apathetic about their faith, and their indifference greatly reveals itself each year when they graduate high school ... and exit their faith altogether. It's a problem every youth worker in every denomination acknowledges... The faith of many of our church kids could be described as nebulous and apathetic.<sup>21</sup>

Jim Burns prescribes the “cure” for spiritual apathy: involvement. Burns declares:

The road to involvement is often slow— and even painful— but it's worth the price. When students feel cared for, have meaningful responsibilities and begin to use their gifts of service in the church and the community, then they're more likely to remain in the church permanently.<sup>22</sup>

That is the goal that we are shooting for! Not just to see our youth stay involved in Church, but to take their involvement to a place of personal responsibility for their spiritual journey. Thankfully, this leads them to not only own their faith but also own

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<sup>21</sup> Jonathan McKee, *Connect: Real Relationships in a World of Isolation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle locations 121–30.

<sup>22</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 117.

their commitment to connect with others seeking the same goal. This truly happens by giving them the practice of experiencing fellowship that feeds their ongoing personal relationship with Jesus and vice versa.

The truth is that many in this generation are aware of their hunger for connections; it is just that the church is probably the last place that they would look for these connections. The authors of *The Slow Fade* identify the heart of it all when they declare that young people are “not fading from our faith communities because they want to; they’re fading because they don’t know where they belong. They’ve never been connected to a community of belonging. They’ve never been shown another way.”<sup>23</sup>

It’s time to show another way. We know the stories of friends and family who have been racked and wrecked by loneliness and a fading of faith. But I believe that greater than our ache about those stories, we need to find a much greater hope. If many would truly say that they have “never been connected to a community of belonging,” the challenge is clear: We must write a new narrative for our churches, youth ministries, and families to lead us all to experience exactly that kind of faith supporting belonging in our midst so that they have a pattern to follow in the future. It is time to wake up and help connect the dots in community.

### **Do You Recognize These Kids?**

Samuel is all on his own. Technically, he’s not homeless or without support, but he has felt profound loneliness since he was ten. That’s when his pastor dad ran off with the church secretary. As a freshman, he sat in the back of our sanctuary. This was the new church his mom was now attending. Shielding himself with the brim of his baseball hat,

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<sup>23</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 846–47.

he did his best to shrink his large physical frame into a compact space so he would not be seen. Being invisible in reality would match his feelings. Some might say his behavior is proof of the problem of kids these days. I would agree – if they mean the problem is the desperate loneliness rampant in the lives of so many young people. But I believe it's not the kids themselves who are the problem.

Michelle is also on her own. Surrounded by a myriad of opportunities and constantly affirmed for her potential, she feels that it's pointless to hope for any kind of balance. So she pushes herself to achieve. There's concert choir and seasonal sports teams, the challenge of maintaining excellent grades and still being active in school leadership. Her performance is driven by never letting anyone down. Meanwhile, *she* seems to be sinking down; the business of life (maybe the busy-ness of life?) is leaving her joyless, totally rung out. When I asked if her frantic schedule was choking out any sense of health, she simply replied, "It is what it is." When pressed if she should say *no* to something, she indignantly shook her head as if that isn't even an option. Some might look at Michelle as a perfect kid making the most of her opportunities. I would agree – if I didn't have the nagging feeling that all of her success was coming at the cost of losing her soul.

Keith could not wait to be out on his own. He was all ready to attend a denominational church school in the Midwest on an academic scholarship. As a child, his father claimed that they went to church "religiously" – every Christmas and Easter. For Keith then, his faith was immature and without much guidance, since he was really without a church home and without many conversations about faith at home. Certainly,

he believed that there was a God, but not that this God ever thought about Keith in a personal or a relational way.

Then Keith began attending church as a middle school student, because his parents wanted to see him be part of a confirmation program (a throw-back to their own childhood). His involvement of Christian community among his peers and his church began to change everything, even change him. After several eye-opening experiences of Christ, Keith came to a personal knowledge and commitment to Christ and spent the balance of his high school years growing in this newfound faith.

His experience of belonging in Christian community had been so positive for him that he would even say his best times in high school were with his youth group and church. During one particular conversation with his youth pastor, Keith felt called to serve in ministry himself. Setting off on this great adventure of college, he fully expected his campus encounters to reflect the spiritually charged nature of the best days of church camp.

Little did he know how far off his expectations would be from the reality of his new setting! Here it seemed that the majority of students thought that any consideration of faith was met simply by attending a church school. After months of floating spiritually, Keith woke up to realize that he was without any authentic, encouraging faith relationships. He found that the fire of his faith had grown cold – like a coal that was once burning – but now was alone. Some might declare that his expectations were too naïve for his own good and that such struggles are to be anticipated. I would agree – if they would also declare that the church of his youth (as great as it was) did Keith a great disservice by never giving a realistic portrayal of the challenges that await him and how

easily and quickly he might lose his passion if he was not aware and prepared. But I know for a fact that Keith didn't receive that message.

Brooke is about to be on her own, too, since she is soon heading off to college away from home. Somehow, though, she isn't too worried about feeling that she'll be *alone* on her own. She carries the confidence of a sturdy faith. Even though she too grew up mostly unchurched as a child, she was invited to a youth group and got plugged in. Her relational connections led her to a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ. As she grew in faith, she also served as a student leader and tasted what it's like to truly own her faith. Her experience of following Christ in the midst of community began to frame her expectations for life after graduation. She knew she had to be intentional about her faith to keep growing – and she knew she needed a community to do so.

She has been surrounded and nurtured by a wider church family that has implicitly and explicitly communicated a commitment to be there for her, so she'd never use the word *lonely* when it comes to her experience of church. Sure, she still has moments of stress, balancing a job and tennis team and youth group participation and life, and most certainly there will be times of failure and frustration that are a natural part of this coming season of life. But I'm not worried about Brooke. I have faith in her faith; her trust in Jesus has been formed in the midst of fellowship and she owns it deeply. When I ask how she feels about this upcoming season of transition, she simply says, "I'm ready."

She has been part of a church that has modeled for her the notion that significant relationships matter. There was an intimate correlation between the vitality of her personal faith and the intentionality of surrounding herself with a network of support. Just

picture this web of spiritual care as influential people – mentors and peers – rallying around a student. These individuals are superstars for kids like Brooke, cheering her on. And if you start connecting the dots of these influential people in community, you get a constellation.<sup>24</sup> Now she is ready to do the same for herself, create her own constellation, after she leaves youth group. The right conversations and specific training have awakened a need in her, a need for fellowship with other followers of Jesus. Thus, Brooke has something in contrast to the other young people I just described: Brooke feels prepared for what lies ahead and can talk about it with hope!

You have kids like Samuel and Michelle and Keith – and hopefully like Brooke – in your churches (or in your home) too. If you are reading this paper, you care about them and want to know how to better care for them. Maybe you are a pastor or a parent, or maybe you work with your church's youth ministry. I am assuming you are one of those persons of influence, so I am excited to reflect together on the great opportunities for deeper relational connections that we must seize in our ministry to young people. How are we reaching kids like Samuel with life-changing hopefulness? How are we extending peace and rest to kids like Michelle who are feeling beyond spent? How are we preparing kids like Keith for the realities of life after the comfort of his spiritual safety net is removed? And how are we encouraging kids like Brooke to continue to grow in the faith that she fully embraces and owns, especially equipping her to form deeper connections with others that constantly can fuel her deepest connection with Christ after she graduates?

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<sup>24</sup> Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 140.



## **Churches Need to Get Out of Their Comfort Zones**

Many of the young people in our churches and families are really in different places on this difficult life journey. Some appear fully disengaged, obviously dragged to church by their parents. They dare any adult to even make eye contact or reach out for a handshake. Some appear comfortable in their own skin but certainly don't convey a sense of openness to connect with the adults in their congregation. Some appear to constantly be on an emotional swing-set: bubbling optimism and excitement one day, then darkness and depression the very next week. As adults who care, we often feel at a loss, unsure of how to relate with young people passing by us in the halls of the church during our gathering times. Many of us don't know how to overcome such generational barriers, so we nod politely and look for a more welcoming Sunday morning conversation. I wonder, will we in our churches continue to practice our politeness and remain in our comfort zones, or will we too heed the wake-up call to a great challenge facing this generation? If the young people exiting our churches are on their way to being lost, one of the major factors driving them away is a loss of significant belonging, again, a need for fellowship.

For surprisingly similar reasons, all the Samuels and Michelles and Keiths and Brookes are dying for someone to desire better for them, to truly be the Church for them (and with them), to help them connect to other followers in such a way that their connection with Christ is solidified and bolstered. What if the common ground of their struggle is the reality that our culturally accepted loneliness is primarily a spiritual issue that we need to address? Consider again this quotation from Paul Tournier:

“We can hope that after us, future generations will have been awakened to the need of fellowship from their childhood up, and that this will be as natural for them as our fierce independence is for us.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977), 51.

This quotation about our relational need for fellowship is nearly 40 years old, but it expressively points toward today's ache for an awakening, and not only for the youngest generation. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, where digital connectedness is all the rage, ironically our deepest needs for friendship are not being met online, leading us to what some are calling "networked individualism."<sup>26</sup> In fact, Tim Challies reflects the painful truth about our "plugged in" world: "We now consider community what was previously mere communication."<sup>27</sup> In so many ways we are settling for less than God's best for us. And sadly, our pastors and church leaders are often modeling this prevailing picture of unaccompanied faith as well.<sup>28</sup> God's best is found in Christian belonging, in fellowship with friends following Jesus together.

We all need to wake up to see that our needs for fellowship and community can be met in the Church. And though ours is an age defined by loneliness, the deep-seated sense of connection and belonging we lack in many of our congregations is right within our grasp. Again, we shouldn't be surprised that most of our young people continue to understand the Christian walk only as a solitary endeavor because that is what they have witnessed from the experience of the adults in their midst.

I have often thought about looking over a crowd of people in our congregation and seeing "thought bubbles" floating above each head. In my imagination, for adults and students alike, each bubble is nearly the same – *"Does anyone care?" "Does anyone know that I'm struggling, that I'm lonely?" "Do I matter?"* And yet, many of us superficially pass the peace and say "I'm fine" and make our way to our cars. Without

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<sup>26</sup> Tim Challies, *The Next Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 1712–13.

<sup>27</sup> Challies, *The Next Story*, Kindle locations 1695–97.

<sup>28</sup> Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1989), 38.

taking the risk to be vulnerable, we have no idea that we truly are not alone in our feeling lonely; we are just alone in our coping with it.

Perhaps many of us are truly aware of our need for belonging, but we so infrequently taste real belonging that our expectations to consistently find it are very low. As one friend told me, “We are turned off when community feels fake or forced or uncomfortable. I think the real problem is that we aren't willing to stick it out in community, even when community is lackluster. *We need to be taught that the value is in the long run.*” Funny, one could make the argument that this description sounds a lot like marriage! Paul Tournier takes exactly such a comical slant with his own proclamation: “There are two things we cannot do alone, one is to be married and the other is to be a Christian.”<sup>29</sup>

Relational connections, especially across generational lines, are few and lacking. And we, by this I mean the Church and Christian families, often seem ill-equipped to reach out to the Samuel, Michelle, Keith, and Brooke (and others like them) in our midst. Perhaps we need to be honest enough to clearly confess that we too ache for real community. One real factor to the disintegration of belonging for many youth today is the eroded trust they have in the adults who are supposed to be there for them.<sup>30</sup> Overall, it is not just that young people are different than their peers of 20 or 30 years; they live in a vastly different world.

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate that we can bring a wake-up call to our congregations, families, and young people themselves about our need for vital relationships to journey together as followers of Christ. We need to connect the dots in

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<sup>29</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 338–41.

<sup>30</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1284–88.

community by intentionally forming relationships of support and nurture that will feed a faith for the long haul. Defining exactly how these vital relationships can be lived out in real-life and refining how we strategically create an environment where this can happen is a key undertaking of the ministry proposals found later in this paper. Yet one thing is clear. If we quit aspiring to some vague and fuzzy definition of fellowship and instead firmly demonstrate a model of ongoing relational connections, we are truly offering something better for our young people.

When their need for fellowship is met, there is hope and rest and peace for their lonely souls. When they experience community, they experience faith in Christ in a tangible and life-giving way, in the way that Church and Christian community was created to provide.

In our churches we see students leaving high school youth groups and we wonder about the strength of their religious conviction and sense of a real, personal relationship with Jesus. With each graduating class, students generally appear to truly “graduate” from their faith. Without an ownership of a personal faith in Jesus Christ that is anchored in community, many of our former-church-going students are putting their faith journeys on hiatus. Statistics demonstrate how their ongoing participation in a church life and faith life drops dramatically during this season. Here is a sampling of different interpretations of the data (*italics added*):

- The ages eighteen to twenty-nine are the black hole of church attendance; this age segment is “missing in action” from most congregations. As shown in the chart, the percentage of church attenders bottoms out during the beginning of adulthood. *Overall, there is a 43 percent drop-off between the teen and early adult years in terms of church engagement.*<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 249–51.

- The research confirmed what we had already been piecing together from other data: *59 percent of young people with a Christian background report that they had or have “dropped out of attending church, after going regularly.”* A majority (57 percent) say they are less active in church today compared to when they were age fifteen. Nearly two-fifths (38 percent) say they have gone through a period when they significantly doubted their faith. Another one-third (32 percent) describe a period when they felt like rejecting their parents’ faith.<sup>32</sup>
- As we have examined other research, *our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who are connected to a youth group when they graduate high school will fail to stick with their faith in college.*<sup>33</sup>
- Research from the Barna Group of Ventura, California, shows that most young people who show strong levels of spiritual activity during the teen years tend to pull back from active participation in the Christian faith during their young adult years. Sadly, many of them never return. *Indeed, the Barna Group concludes that as many as 6 out of every 10 twentysomethings who were involved in a church during their teen years will fail to maintain their active spirituality during their years of emerging adulthood.*<sup>34</sup>
- Young Americans are dropping out of religion at an alarming rate of five to six times the historic rate (30 to 40 percent have no religion today, versus 5 to 10 percent a generation ago). These results correspond to Rainer Research studies that show *about 70 percent of U.S. youth drop out of church between the ages of 18 and 22.*<sup>35</sup>
- University of Chicago Study (’99) found that *only 16% of 18-21 year olds had ongoing regular contact with the faith of their family.*<sup>36</sup>
- The line rises in preschool and begins to fall at middle school. It dips in the later high school years and then nose-dives the first years of college. Every expert suggests the same thing— *somewhere between 65 and 80 percent of people who grow up in the church drop out of church when they become college-aged.* An America’s Research Group survey conducted in 2009 found that 95 percent of twenty- to twenty-nine-year-old evangelicals attended church regularly during their elementary and middle school years, but only 55 percent attended during high school. By the time they reached college, only 11 percent were still attending church.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 269–73.

<sup>33</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 93–95.

<sup>34</sup> Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle locations 114–17.

<sup>35</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, Kindle locations 124–27.

<sup>36</sup> Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007), Kindle location 826.

<sup>37</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 112–17.

- We looked at the faith of students who attended a Protestant church (mainline or evangelical) twice a month or more for at least one year in high school. Here's what we found: *About 70 percent of young adults ages 18 to 22 stopped attending church regularly for at least one year. Is that a 70 percent dropout rate? With all the nuances and with all the caveats, we'd say so.* That's a dropout rate; a much too high dropout rate. Other research and studies among *evangelical* youth, however, indicate that number is almost certainly much lower (see the study mentioned earlier). And it should be noted that we found almost two-thirds of those who left in our Protestant study were back in church by the end of the study.<sup>38</sup>

While there could be a much greater detailed examination of these statistics, for the purposes of this paper we can see that there is great agreement that somewhere between 40% and 70% of students growing up in our churches leave active church participation – or even lose an active personal faith – or both.

There are some in the world of research (including Ed Stetzer quoted above) who would caution that such reports of the death of the next generation Church are greatly exaggerated. Stetzer wrote a piece for USA Today entitled “The Christian Sky is (Not) Falling,” where he contends that “American Christianity is not dying; but it’s slowly being clarified.”<sup>39</sup> He does admit that there are some concerning trends, but simply states that “Christians are losing their home field advantage” in America.<sup>40</sup>

Bradley Wright in his book *Christians Are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You've Been Told* clearly stresses that many statics that come with such a doomsday thrust are not very trustworthy.<sup>41</sup> Wright maintains that such “overheated hyperbole” comes at a cost if there isn’t a balance to the wider conversation.<sup>42</sup> He emphatically states

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<sup>38</sup> Ed Stetzer. “The Real Reasons Young Adults Drop Out of Church.” (accessed December 9, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Ed Stetzer. “The Christian Sky is (Not) Falling” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2015/may/christian-sky-is-not-falling-my-piece-for-usatoday.html> (accessed August 4, 2015).

<sup>40</sup> Ed Stetzer. “The Christian Sky is (Not) Falling” (accessed August 4, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Bradley R. E. Wright, *Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites...and Other Lies You've Been Told* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing, 2010), Kindle locations 707–09.

<sup>42</sup> Wright, *Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites*, Kindle locations 693–94.

his desire for such balance by emphasizing, “What I don’t see in the data are evidence of a cataclysmic loss of young people. Have we lost the young? No. Sure, terrible things could happen in the future, but so could great things.”<sup>43</sup>

The work of Christian Smith and others in *Soul Searching* (and the National Study of Youth and Religion) also discovered that there is much encouragement about the spiritual perspective of young people in America since there is a “significant number of adolescents” for whom faith is very important.<sup>44</sup> Overall, “U.S. teenagers as a whole are thus not religiously promiscuous faith mixers.”<sup>45</sup> At the same time, there are many more young people “inarticulate and befuddled about religion” as there are seriously committed to faith.<sup>46</sup> All this to say that we really should remember to approach all research with great discernment.

At the same time, within the complexities of the research about the phenomenon of disposable faith, a substantial theme appears. For many of the young growing up in our churches, there is a great disconnect happening – and it is not just that going off to college is an “automatic faith killer.”<sup>47</sup> The gap seems profound between the experience of support and encouragement of faith life during their school years (where they are often surrounded by youth group, church family, and nuclear family) and the years that follow high school graduation.

This season of life immediately after high school is a brutally lonely trek, most often leading to a lack any kind of Christian fellowship. And so the need for relational

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, *Christians are Hate-Filled Hypocrites*, Kindle locations 782–87.

<sup>44</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle locations 621–22.

<sup>45</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 718.

<sup>46</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 640–41.

<sup>47</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 2326.

connections takes on other forms of friendship that do not necessarily include an element of faith in Christ. Certainly many of these avenues are healthy and appropriate. However, we must remember the intimate link between Christian friendships and faith encouragement; they go hand in hand. As pastors and parents and congregations, we witness the dire consequences of such fierce independence as students drift from the Church and drift from their faith. This is the reason that we must create a ministry vision that drives the most significant and influential people in the lives of our youth to be more intentional about investing in our students relationally, to connect the dots in community, so they have a pattern to follow on their own. It is in the midst of practicing community that a deep understanding of our need for it is stirred.

As our need for community is then awakened, this ministry vision becomes a congregationally-driven commitment to prepare students to transition from high school without graduating from their faith and can strategically meet this need for connections that matter. When this is accompanied by the practical experience of real-life intergenerational fellowship, this team-based approach would then assist them in staying strong in their faith beyond their youth group years.<sup>48</sup> An intentional paradigm is required to train students to create their own network of Christian support. By equipping them to properly practice this faith ownership before graduating from high school, they will be more likely to keep their faith after graduation. Ongoing encouragement from their “home base” (family, home church, Christian mentors from YoungLife or youth group, etc.) must remind these students that their enduring faith matters to us. So while

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<sup>48</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1076–79.



many of these graduates might be out of sight while away at college, they are most definitely *not* out of mind – nor out of our prayers.<sup>49</sup>

This paragraph truly provides the overview of this entire thesis, so it bears repeating! The ministry vision that will be offered needs to be:

- Congregationally-driven (including a high level of investment from the lead pastor, the staff, key lay leaders, and parents)
- Inspiring a commitment to prepare students from all key parties, including the students themselves
- Strategically meeting the acute need for connections that matter
- Accompanied by the practical experience of real-life intergenerational fellowship
- A team-based approach (that is communicated as a partnership between parish and parents)
- Constructed around an intentional paradigm to train students to create their own network of Christian support
- Established to equip students to properly practice this faith ownership before graduating from high school
- Followed by ongoing encouragement from their “home base.”

Adults cannot give to students what they don’t have themselves, however. To achieve such a ministry vision requires a great investment from the entire congregation, an attitude that is committed to living out such a vision of community among the adults as well. As we will discover in the Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry (which will be further explored in chapter three), it is the overall culture of a church which has the most potential to provide fertile soil to grow up young disciples who hang on to their faith. The authors of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* believe from their research that the lead pastor’s influence is instrumental in shaping a culture “endowed with a palpable sense of the living, active presence of God at work among the people of the whole congregation,” so leadership is essential in modeling an active and

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<sup>49</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1125–28.

alive faith.<sup>50</sup> When young people feel this kind of “communal awareness” in the midst of their church family, they know that they are part of something much bigger than themselves; they are actually participating with God’s work in the world.<sup>51</sup> Young people being developed in these exemplary churches can attest to being supported by a network of adult mentors, fully “surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence.”<sup>52</sup>

Churches truly need a fully developed strategy that does just this! Such a strategy helps all to see the need to connect the dots relationally; that is communicating and embracing a plan to intentionally *live out faith-forming-fellowship together*. Connecting the dots is all about linking up people (“dots”) in a web, a sort of spiritual safety net. Deliberate efforts to do so demonstrate that we believe we can reclaim our understanding of the necessity for Christian community – and actually make such belonging a reality. Significant mentoring (which will be described as a “constellation” of support – based on the metaphor described by Mark DeVries and others) can no longer be an option, it must be an essential practice.<sup>53</sup> If we want to see young people with strong faith, we must create opportunities that give them a variety of relational experiences in which they develop the competencies needed to initiate their own network of support. That’s what I am advocating: Connecting the dots in community is essential for ongoing faith vibrancy.

### **Investment Comes at a Price**

While there are no guarantees, the greatest chance for our young people to retain a vibrant faith as they move into the world happens when they have been shown a pattern

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<sup>50</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 233–46.

<sup>51</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 233–46.

<sup>52</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1794–802.

<sup>53</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 143–144.

of being surrounded by parish and parents who are partners in support of their faith.<sup>54</sup> Such a task cannot be given tacit lip-service from the available congregation of adults who only *wish* the best for the emerging generation. Practical participation should be expected of the entire church family as they become more aware of the high stakes of this issue. Investment comes at a price and requires a great deal of understanding both of the scriptural imperatives to community life, as well as the unique challenges of adolescence in this era. As this vision for connecting the dots in community is lived out, specific steps in a unified direction will need to be determined for each individual congregation that is dedicated to something better for its young people. This strategy for sustaining faith just doesn't happen on accident. It takes an investment.

What does such an investment look like? What will motivate us to help our churches model fellowship to our students from their childhood up?

Before we think about the congregation's role, let's make it personal.

If you think of a specific young person in your life right now, what are you willing to do to set them up on the right course in life? Maybe this young person is your child or grandchild or just a dear friend. Whatever the relationship, she or he is invaluable to you. You smile when you say his or her name. For me, that smile comes when I think of my own children.

Katie, Nikki, and Joey are full of life and spunk (as well as a healthy dose of their father's goofiness). As a committed dad, I know that there is a price to pay to raise them well. There are investments to be made, costs to be considered. I must feed and clothe them, provide a safe and loving home. I must help them with homework, take them to the

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<sup>54</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 3821–25.

doctor, get some exercise with them, put money away for their college fund. I need to give them unconditional love and model healthy relationships in our family. I desire to pass on my own faith in Jesus Christ and surround them with a caring spiritual family, the Church. All of this activity is about investment because I care for them to the best of my ability, to do all I can to best prepare them for life ahead.

If we consider, however, the way we spend money, time, and energy, most of these investments have very little spiritual significance. Certainly teachers, doctors, coaches, and financial advisors are all worthy partners in helping us provide for our children. But where are the faith forces at work in our lives? Who are the people “coaching” and “advising” them spiritually? Where do we intentionally build networks and relationships of faith support for our children?

This is exactly the kind of investment I’m promoting. Effective faith support can come in a variety of ways. While more specific programmatic suggestions will be offered later in this paper, it is important to know that there is a range of possibilities to be pursued. From those mentors who are consistently serving as Sunday school teachers or small group leaders, to adults who commit to specifically pray for a student by name or teach a student apprentice to play a musical instrument or lead worship; all of these endeavors help our youth to be “surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence.”<sup>55</sup> But these efforts will not happen without work. We must be willing to pay the price as individuals – and as congregations – to make this a priority.

To make wise investments, we must know what the research says about the faith of our students as they transition from high school and the cultural dynamics at play. In

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<sup>55</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1794–802.

many ways, the health of the future generation of the Church is on the line. Once we realize that, how can we not act? Larry Crabb puts forth this hard-hitting challenge:

It's time to build the church, a community of people who take refuge in God and encourage each other to never flee to another source of help, a community of folks who know the only way to live in this world is to focus on the spiritual life—our life with God and others. It won't be easy, but it will be worth it. Our impact on the world is at stake.<sup>56</sup>

Each congregation must be willing to develop a strategy that trains our young people to relationally connect the dots of faith-forming fellowship. This ministry vision will only work in harmony with congregational planning if it is deliberate in establishing this kind of support network. The strategy needs to be holistic by partnering with parents to carry out their role of nurturing faith with greater confidence. Thus, this philosophy requires buy-in from the entire congregation, from the senior pastor to the church board and from key stakeholders to parents and general pew-sitters, and then this vision needs to be translated into practical programming. As with any philosophical base, *what* we plan and *how* we plan needs to be led by the “*why*” we plan with a specific purpose in mind.<sup>57</sup>

In commencing this development of such a ministry philosophy, we will examine in chapter one the research and realities of faith not “sticking” with our students. While the research does not provide a totally unified description of the problem, there is much consensus in the discoveries to properly describe the challenge facing churches today.

With the problem more clearly defined, chapter two will consider the foundation of a ministry philosophy that takes into account the proper biblical and theological

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<sup>56</sup> Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing Group, 1999), Kindle locations 519–21.

<sup>57</sup> Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), Kindle locations 773–76.

underpinnings regarding Christian community. These perspectives will stand in stark contrast to the struggles found in the developmental and cultural factors that affect our young people. There is great hope to be discovered in scripture's call to community.

Chapter three will provide an overview of the most relevant and timely research related to this topic. This literary review will not only cover the specific concerns of the epidemic of so many young people losing their faith, it will also highlight the hope that can be found in models of ministry that create an environment for faith support and nurture. These ongoing invitations to setting such habits can be reinforced as young people mature enough to own their faith. There are some very inspiring examples of approaching important solutions to this problem and these examples need to be considered. Literature that demonstrates the vital aspect of family formed faith will also be discussed. Overall, we will discover that we can no longer settle for the selfish cultural desire for Church to be entirely about "what I get out of it" or what Jerry Bridges calls "self-absorbed individualism" as the New Testament concept of fellowship.<sup>58</sup>

Chapter four will explore the specifics of a program design for *connecting the dots in community* by using the metaphor of a constellation of support, and a particular congregational ministry vision will be recommended. Other specific programmatic proposals will be offered to directly speak to this ministry need. A presentation of the difference that a "Grad Prep Program" could make in strengthening faith for adolescents will also be considered. In tandem with this effort, I will evaluate the kind of culture needed to inspire long-lasting faith within my own congregational setting. Research tools and surveys specific to my ministry context will be discussed to discern both the positive

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<sup>58</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 731–32.

ways that we are responding to the challenge to connect the dots in community, as well as highlight opportunities for improvement.

Finally, chapter five will propose several concrete steps to enhancing the efforts in our ministry setting to help students connect the dots in community. These efforts will reflect upon and evaluate the specific research done within our congregation. First, there must be an agenda for the congregation to better create a culture where parents and parish work together to invest in the passing on of the faith to their children. Second, a precise plan for ongoing endeavors to better equip high school upper classmen will be fully examined. Overall, this Grad Prep Program will set a framework for a youth ministry to focus on four crucial components: hosting the right conversations, creating the right relationships, encouraging students to own a long-lasting kind of faith, and providing the support of a spiritual safety net from a home congregation committed to its young people beyond the time they spend in youth ministry.

If we are to assist the children of our congregations to seek community as essential for a faith that lasts and jettison the prevailing contemporary preoccupation with lonesome individuality, then overall congregational dedication is non-negotiable.

For those of us who obviously care about the kids in our midst and want them to have an enduring faith, we must rally our communities (whether churches or parachurch organizations) to this cause. If we want to see an awakening toward faith that sticks for the long-haul, it's time to respond to this need for community. This isn't just about "reinventing youth ministry" or simply tweaking our programs for students off in some far corner of the congregation.<sup>59</sup> Our task is much more central to the wider calling of our

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<sup>59</sup> Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), Kindle locations 1456–58.

whole community of faith. As Kara Powell writes, “The reality is that Sticky Faith isn’t just a youth ministry issue. It’s a whole church issue.”<sup>60</sup> Ok, then, whole Church: Let’s connect the dots in community!

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<sup>60</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2931–37.



## CHAPTER ONE

### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

“Community has become a hollow buzzword in Christian circles; every church offers it, but almost nobody experiences it. Instead of delivering the love for which people yearn, we build bigger and better facilities and programs, which become gathering places for increasing numbers of lonely, isolated, unconnected people.”

– Dick Staub, *The Culturally Savvy Christian*

“Let’s keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:23-25, *The Message*)

I remember two conversations with young men that show what happens when we do not fully prepare our youth with an accurate picture of Christian community, and its vital connection to a personal faith in Christ. One was my cousin, whom I will call Nick, who was attending a Christian college in Southern California several years ago. We were relaxing in a hot tub when I simply asked, “How are things going with your faith?” It seemed harmless enough. After all, Nick had grown up in a very strong youth group, been on numerous mission trips, and was a student leader. He even chose his university (at least in part) for its sense of Christian community. I was curious about his active faith life in college, so I asked the question.

He paused for a moment, seemingly dumbfounded. “No one has asked me that since I’ve been here at college.” It was clear that he didn’t really even know how to answer, which was an answer in itself. He had become so disengaged from active participation in a community of faith that he seemed almost embarrassed. At some level he didn’t even know he had been without spiritual friends until this conversation.

A second experience happened with a former student. Drinking coffee with Ethan over the holidays, I asked him the same question. Immediately, he began to talk about his lack of attendance at church or campus ministry groups and he followed this self-inflicted guilt trip with a critique of his nonexistent discipline of prayer. When I pushed further that I was more interested in his “attention” to Jesus than his “attendance” in church, his silence demonstrated that he could sense a significant connection between the two. These stories appear to be the norm, not the exception. Kenda Dean writes, “For a striking number of teenagers, our interviews seemed to be the first time any adult had asked them what they believed, and why it mattered to them.”<sup>1</sup>

As I reflect on these conversations, I am struck by the lack of preparedness that both young men had for the difficulties of keeping a “firm grip” on faith during college. Their experience of Christian faith wasn’t sticking in their years after graduation. Moreover, it was clear that *no one* was asking them how they were coping with these difficulties. They lacked older, caring mentors who were asking the right questions. They seemed to be among a majority of young people who report never having an adult friend other than their parents.<sup>2</sup> Again, this just demonstrated to me how very alone both felt on their spiritual journeys.

Clearly swept up in the all the milieu of college life, they had joined the majority of those who had been “avoiding worship together” – and not because that was their plan. Faith connections in community appeared to be extremely hard to find; they were becoming statistics of a generation often absent in church or campus ministry programs.

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<sup>1</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle locations 382–84.

<sup>2</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 384–88.

Obviously there are churches that are near every college campus and more than likely a handful of Christian parachurch organizations affiliated with each school, but these resources often remain untapped and rarely considered. The reasons behind why so many are being sucked into a “black hole” and falling out of active connections with Christian community are essentially the key issues this project is seeking to address.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, there has been a growing sense of shortcoming among church leaders and parents when it comes to preparing students to hang on to their faith after graduation. And there is a growing consensus found in the research to be considered in this paper that faith is not sticking for many, if not most, students following graduation. David Kinnaman reflects on the enormity of this inquiry behind this trend by clearly stating, “Instead of one or two ‘biggies,’ we discovered a wide range of perspectives, frustrations, and disillusionments that compel twentysomethings to disconnect. No single reason pushes a majority of young adults to drop out.”<sup>4</sup>

While many factors relate to this complex issue, one of the primary elements to be considered is the loss of community. For many in our churches, there’s a lack of clarity when it comes to what biblical community is all about and exactly how these relational connections help develop faith ownership. Research points out that both religious practice and personal beliefs during this time of transition are “all over the map,” with varied influences affecting their sense of confidence in their relationship with Jesus.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, churches themselves seem “stuck” in responding to these challenges. “The way we’ve always done it” has led us to the crisis of the day. Nothing

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<sup>3</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 249–51.

<sup>4</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1427–30.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle locations 618–19.

short of an overhaul of our philosophy of ministry needs to be considered, one that includes several key factors. First, a greater understanding of the culture of adolescence is demanded. Next, the biblical mandate for the Church to be true community must be explored. In addition, each family must be encouraged to train up their children to keep the faith into adulthood and consider the power that parental modeling of faith has on children. Also, churches must evaluate whether their ministries are intentionally inspiring intergenerational faith by measuring what kind of impact relationships of support are having. If these vital steps are not accomplished, most congregations will continue to foster mediocre, immature faith in their young people that will have a tendency to fade with the pressures of emerging adulthood.

We are wise to see the both/and nature of this vital issue: faith durability and Christian community connections go hand in hand. In *The Slow Fade*, the authors drive this point home by declaring, “Building a sturdy faith takes an intergenerational community. Spiritual maturity validates every part as crucial to the whole. We need one another.”<sup>6</sup>

We truly do need each other – and since most of our congregations and families would have a hard time conveying a clear vision about the necessity of a strategy for forming long-lasting faith forged in community, there is a demand for a paradigm shift, some intentional ministry renovation. Many pastors and parents would openly concede that our best efforts haven’t always contributed to a faith that lasts. But almost every single one of them would articulate the importance of this task. This is the simple reality: for the vast majority of our graduates, this conversation about a faith that lasts is essential

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<sup>6</sup> Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith, *The Slow Fade* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2010), Kindle locations 915–17

because a time is quickly coming when they will be without most of the support network they've known while in our churches. This philosophical renovation can help these students initiate and practice connecting the dots by being intentional and committed to Christian community and to partnerships of accountability. Such a decisive response can help them avoid becoming the statistics on the sad side of the equation.

### **Faith Isn't Sticking...and Here Are Some Reasons**

“American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we're responsible.”

– Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*

There are varied reasons why both the Church and well-meaning Christian parents need to share the responsible for failing to help produce a durable faith for our children. One key element that strips the “sticky-ness” of faith from our young people is our disappointing and lackluster efforts at true Christian community. The critique of many postmodern thinkers is dead-on in their assessment of the brokenness of our individualistic culture.<sup>7</sup> Our faith development as followers of Christ has been crippled by our fierce desire for individuality. Often we have been more committed to a personal “declaration of independence” in a very private relationship with Jesus Christ than any commitment combining a personal walk connected to Christian community. As Gordon Smith stresses:

We need to resist the propensity (also part of our revivalist heritage) to regard the Christian life as being about an individual transaction with God, either at conversion or in the process of transformation. It is necessarily a life lived in community. The Christian vision of life is anchored in relationships—specifically, in relationships that are marked by love.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 234.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), Kindle locations 2248–51.

Another of the primary reasons that faith isn't sticking for our young adults is that Christian community is seen as optional. Tony Jones argues, "Many churches, particularly evangelical ones, make this mistake, and here's why: too many evangelical churches have emphasized the vertical, just-me-and-Jesus relationship to the exclusion of the horizontal relationships with other human beings and with all of creation."<sup>9</sup> An important corrective needs to come into play to battle this consumeristic vision of faith. This is especially true for young people, whose lives are dominated by a cultural consumer narrative that targets youth and actually tries to befriend them with products to sell instead of real relationships to nurture.<sup>10</sup> For many good reasons, Stanley Grenz believes that one aspect of the unrest of this emerging generation will push a "postmodern articulation of the Christian gospel (that) will be post-individualistic."<sup>11</sup> Our students need to grasp that Christian community is essential, that it is a commitment to community that leads to a faith that lasts. As the chorus of a recent song by Tenth Avenue North resounds, "We're not meant to live this life alone."<sup>12</sup>

Often, however, we in the Church attempt to console ourselves by stating that the exodus of young people from the Church is just a season that most (if not all of us) go through and that we simply just need to "have faith" that this generation will come back to the fold. Yet this simplistic thinking dismisses the gravity of the cultural dynamics that are compounding the disappearance of younger folks from our churches today.<sup>13</sup> While

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<sup>9</sup> Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), Kindle location 326.

<sup>10</sup> John Berard, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett, *Consuming Youth: Navigating Youth from Being Consumers to Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 1194–99.

<sup>11</sup> Stanley Grenz, *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 167.

<sup>12</sup> Tenth Avenue North, "No Man is an Island," *Island EP*, Formerly Music, Sony/ATV Timber Publishing, Prepare For The Zombie Apocalypse, West Main Music, CD, 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 900–2.

there have always been dropouts from faith, David Kinnaman asserts something is happening “on a deeper level...(that) is about new pressures facing the entire Christian community as we seek to pass on the faith.”<sup>14</sup> In the face of such pressures (and in the hopes that the truth of scripture will be a spiritual antidote to this pressure), we cannot miss the biblical imperatives here. We must raise up young people who continue to grow in the ownership of faith shaped by the context of faithful community.

Recent research shared in the book *Sticky Faith* shows that after graduation, nearly half of the active seniors in that study were disconnected from their faith by the time they graduate from college.<sup>15</sup> As we translate this research to our own unique settings, we are confronted by very challenging data. These numbers are even more striking when we honestly assess the fact that many of our active students from each graduating class have already vacated the church over the years before they become seniors! Imagine looking at class pictures of our darling lil’ cherub children’s choirs and then realizing that by the time that class gets to graduation’s doorstep, often the vast majority of each class is no longer actively seeking faith. With personal faith ownership lagging even before graduation, we certainly can expect that the number of students with faith will continue to dwindle during their college years.

Fuller Youth Institute, the leading research group behind the *Sticky Faith* work, aptly describes the overarching theme: “We see that kids’ faith is usually more like Scotch tape or masking tape. Maybe, just maybe, that faith is cohesive enough to hold them together through high school. Just barely. But then they graduate and tragically fall

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<sup>14</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 374–76,

<sup>15</sup> Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 94.

away.”<sup>16</sup> Tragic indeed and something must be done among congregations and families committed to providing something better for our kids.

The truth is that many young people had every intention of sticking with their faith. One aspect of the *Sticky Faith* study clearly demonstrates this: “Only 20 percent of college students who leave the church planned to do so during high school. The remaining 80 percent intended to stick with their faith—but didn’t.”<sup>17</sup> Therefore, rigorous preparation for the struggles of post-graduation faith is so needed; it must become a priority for our congregations. Again, the research from Fuller Youth Institute shows that “only one of every seven graduates leaves youth group feeling ‘very prepared’ for what college brings their way.”<sup>18</sup>

Before solutions can be offered so that our young people are truly more prepared, we must probe deeply into the fact that often our churches and our families are stuck in their slack approach to passing on the faith. Combined with the loss of community connections in our churches, the palpable uncertainty of parents who don’t understand their role in faith development, and the unfocused nature of many of our youth ministries, it’s no wonder that we have so much ground to regain.

### **Churches are Stuck**

It is the church alone, nevertheless, which can answer the world of today’s tremendous thirst for community...(but) instead of demonstrating the way to fellowship to the world today, the church seems to embody the triumph of individualism. The faithful sit side by side without even knowing each other.

— Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness*

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<sup>16</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 56–59.

<sup>17</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 105–10.

<sup>18</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2572–75.



In the past few years, many have begun seriously reflecting upon the Church's role and responsibility in raising up the faith of its young people, so nurturing them in a vital sense of community that their commitment to a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is cemented and made real. Most definitely, faith itself is a gift of God. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10 NIV). We cannot manufacture faith on our own and we must never lose sight of God's gift. At the same time, we must reaffirm the truth of scripture that demonstrates that our faith is expressed in community, as Paul continues:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Ephesians 2:19-22, NIV)

So then, how do the people of God cooperate with God's Spirit to instill faith in its children? Various authors have pointed out key factors that have led to churches being stuck in a rut, failing to help faith stick for their children. Considering the importance of community to nurture strong faith, most churches would have to confess and agree with the fact that "the faithful sit side by side without even knowing each other." What a tragic loss! So, perhaps the vast majority of the adults in our congregations are not experiencing faith-building fellowship either, so it stands to reason that our young people are going to be deficient in their capacity for community as well. And while every church would assert that the faith of their children is of utmost importance, few can even begin to articulate any sort of strategy to demonstrate that such a value is truly held! In fact, Kara

Powell writes, “Given the seeming importance of retaining youth for most religious groups in the United States, it is striking how haphazardly most congregations go about it.”<sup>19</sup>

To get “unstuck,” some hard work by everyone needs to be done, not just by pastors and church leaders. The ruts run deep – from our inability to consider change (“*We’ve always done it that way!*”) to our attitudes about the teenage years in general (“*Kids will be kids and they just aren’t interested in faith! And they definitely don’t want any adults there to meddle!*”) and to who is responsible (“*I’m not qualified to talk to my kids about Christ. That’s what we have professional pastors for!*”). While there are many different dynamics that could be included in this survey of the shortcomings of our congregations, for our purposes, we will consider three primary factors.

First, for many churches, the building up of the faith of families and children is not being articulated as a key mission of the congregation, nor are many parents being equipped to support the spiritual growth of their own kids. In many settings, the very emergence of more professional youth ministry programs have done a disservice to our churches by encouraging parents to abdicate their role as the primary faith influencers of their children.<sup>20</sup> These parents have turned that task over to the Church. Thus, while parents want to be supportive of the faith of their children, they have focused faith nurturing as the job of the pastor (or youth pastor), with little consideration of their own role in faith nurture.

Some authors, like Ben Freudenburg, have been challenging churches for the last fifteen years to change the focus of where a greater share of faith nurture should be

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<sup>19</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 252–53.

<sup>20</sup> Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 45–46.

located, bringing it squarely back into the home.<sup>21</sup> The church then becomes a training ground whose “primary function is to supply energy to the home-lighthouses that surround it,” instead of a drop off center for teens getting their weekly download of faith content.<sup>22</sup> If a congregation is serious about breaking out of the rut caused by broken models of passing on the faith, a consistently articulated vision for something different is needed. In a very positive sense, we have every reason to be hopeful about the resources that God has placed at our disposal. The challenge just comes in the renewed efforts necessary to discern the proper way to activate these resources.

Second, most churches have little or no specific training in place to adequately prepare their young people for the realities that lie ahead after graduation from high school. While many churches take very seriously their purpose of Christian education, often this becomes translated as simply “head knowledge” of the Christian life. With many activities established to keep kids busy and help each make a personal commitment to Christ, most churches and parachurch groups lack the laser focus of truly equipping students to own their own faith, let alone understand the critical nature of living that faith out in community. Ironically, most young people love the sense of community that they experience in their YoungLife club or youth group.<sup>23</sup> However, without intentional training and discussion about the hard work of finding community in the season that follows graduation, their unsuspecting disconnect from an active faith may soon begin. The program proposal that is to come in this thesis seeks to directly speak to this issue of preparation.

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<sup>21</sup> Ben F. Freudenburg, and Rick Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 1998), Kindle location 1159.

<sup>22</sup> Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Kindle location 1163.

<sup>23</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 1366.

Without a designed plan in place to build up competencies that are practiced in the context of their congregation *before* they graduate, these faith struggles will continue for those who are departing our churches after graduation. The wisdom of Proverbs is appropriate to reflect on in this situation: “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it” (Proverbs 22:6, NIV). Training takes intention and there is much to be gained for a congregation that makes such an equipping ministry a priority. Again, it must be reinforced that this is not just the responsibility of the youth ministry. Instead, our students must be included and wholly enfranchised into the wider congregation.<sup>24</sup> Opportunities for students themselves to learn to initiate supportive faith relationships in intergenerational ways will also be an aspect of the program proposal.

Finally, many churches do indeed suffer from the lack of anything that gives the impression of true community of any depth among the adults, with very little intentionality about forming relationships across the generations. Most youth ministry programs are simply little churches of their own, separate in their own activities and community. They are often disconnected from any purposeful community life with the other generations of the church, aside from the adult leaders who help with youth group. (This has often been described as “the one-eared Mickey Mouse” model of youth ministry, with only the slightest connection between the adults/church – Mickey’s head – and the students/youth group – Mickey’s ear. They are barely touching at all.)<sup>25</sup> Any sense of “being the family of God” is often relegated to joint worship time.

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<sup>24</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle location 1134.

<sup>25</sup> Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle location 1653.

One must wonder about vital biblical teaching that leads people to mature enough to rely on others in community. If this message is significantly absent in our churches, we are left with sad conclusions about our stuck churches and unfocused youth ministries. As Duffy Robbins reflects, “Surveys of church young people indicate that we’re doing a better job of getting them to show up than helping them to grow up.”<sup>26</sup> Again, we discover the disconnect; our churches lack faith-forming fellowship in the midst of the wider congregation, so our hopes for ongoing faith growth for our children are hindered.

Merely “showing up” probably isn’t going to help our young people embrace a faith strong enough to weather the turbulent times ahead. So while there isn’t a congregation in America today that would say it has all of these dynamics figured out, I wonder how many churches are even paying attention to these dynamics! Is your church asking the important questions about what it would look like to take seriously the research about the need to build our young people up in a network of community that teaches them fellowship is essential? Kenda Dean sums up the quandary well: “Whatever the strengths of American congregations, we struggle mightily when it comes to handing on faith to young people.”<sup>27</sup> “Handing on faith” represents so much more than just “fellowship” being defined as coffee and chit-chat time in the Fellowship Hall or just showing up for youth group or church worship service as simply attendees. “Handing on faith” embodies the vision of a committed and growing personal trust in Jesus Christ that is durable enough to withstand the difficulties in a world that is often *anti*-faith. This trust, in the fullest sense, is a durable faith because it is a faith that has both a high sense

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<sup>26</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, Kindle locations 170–74.

<sup>27</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle locations 227–29.

of personal ownership and clear understanding of being anchored in a community of the people of God.

“Passing on a durable faith.” It seems like such a high hope in a fast-food, convenience-store, mostly disposable world. But we can do so much more to help connect the dots of faithful fellowship for our youth. We as parents, we as pastors, we as a parish of people who have pledged our support for our children, must begin by confessing that often we have not given enough attention to this responsibility. Certainly, an overemphasis on failure in this conversation is inappropriate, and there are many examples of churches thriving in this arena and parents successfully encouraging their children in staying strong in their walk with Jesus. Still, it is critical to look in the mirror and evaluate our own situations.

Though we sense that all must share in the task of raising faithful kids, we (as parents and congregations) are often without any precise plans to pass on the faith. Instead, in many ways we have to share some of the responsibility for dropping the ball, fumbling the handoff of faith, and allowing our kids to miss out on the blessing of a crowd of fellow sojourners walking beside them. They are still on a journey, to be sure, but perhaps we have set such low expectations, many are tripped up more than challenged, just floating through church-life during high school. But as their next chapter of life begins after graduation, floating in a bigger sea becomes much more fraught with danger.

## The Low Bar Expectations of Contemporary Christianity

“Transitioning out of high school into college is like you’re leaving on a giant cruise ship. You’re heading out of this harbor and everyone’s waving you off. Let’s say this ship is your faith. As soon as you start sailing out to this new port called college, you realize you’re in a dingy. You don’t have this huge ship, and you’re completely not prepared, and your boat is sinking! Unless there’s someone with a life raft who’s ready to say, ‘We got you. Come right here. This is where you can be, and this is where you can grow,’ you’re done.”

– A College Senior interviewed in *Sticky Faith*

“The elevation of the individual to a nearly absolute status has affected American Christianity to the detriment of true biblical community and accountability. Everyone tends to do what is right in his or her own eyes.”

– Brian Godawa, *Hollywood Worldviews*

“People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.” (Mark 10:13-16, NIV)

After contemplating the above quotation from a college senior who describes her launch into adulthood as a solo dingy experience, I must admit that this powerful image shook me. I can relate to that exact feeling as I arrived at my college. The friends and supporters who were cheering me on were now a thousand miles away and I felt overwhelmingly on my own. I had such high expectations of my faith thriving and growing in college, but somehow I got pulled down by the very low bar expectations about faith accepted in our culture. The following quotation from *The Slow Fade* perfectly describes the struggle I felt. The authors write:

At a time in their lives when their faith should be accelerating, it has begun to dim. At a stage when they’re developing a new network of friends, there is a relational gap. At the moment they are beginning to wrestle with what they thought was certain, they are missing voices they know they can trust.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle location 84.

In my experience, in elevating myself as an individual during this transition of life, my faith was truly dimming. And the more I was blindsided by the struggles of being all alone in that dingy, the more embarrassed I became about my own spiritual failures and lack of preparation for the challenges I was experiencing.<sup>29</sup> It was at this point of my journey that I was actively avoiding the thing I most needed: Christian community. Needless to say, there was no warm welcome for my immature faith as I landed on campus.

Think back to Samuel, Michelle, Keith, and Brooke, or think of the young person you have had on your mind. How would Jesus welcome them into his arms and bless them? How would Jesus break through the walls of defense and seeming disinterest and embrace them? How should the people of Jesus, the Church, receive this hurting generation while they are with us in our youth groups so they are ready for the hard realities ahead? Can we do this in such a way that they know for certain that they matter and that we want to help them be strong in their faith as they grow up?

I wonder how well we do in welcoming the children who are entrusted to us as parents and as congregations. Do we follow the model of Jesus, with arms wide open and a great sense of prayerful closeness and blessing? Or do we join in with the very busy and stuck disciples who inadvertently built barriers between needy families and Jesus? I mean, we really are all so busy.

There are many vital issues at stake for the contemporary Church to consider. If we truly want to be a welcoming community that blesses our young ones, we must assess

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<sup>29</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2624–30.



both the barriers and opportunities in place to have great expectations for our students to keep faith for the long haul.

So what is contributing to the “stuck-ness” of our churches? Three crucial factors must be explored. First, as already stated, we have to explore the definition of and lost sense of community in our churches and culture. Second, we need to look at the uncertainty of parents who seem to be striving for their children in every area of life apart from spiritual nurture. Last, unfocused congregational youth ministry programs are not addressing the important needs of students as they transition beyond high school. Our undersized expectations regarding the faithfulness of our young people have placed the bar so low that we keep tripping, keep getting stuck, and feel extremely discouraged in the process.

### **Lost Sense of Community**

We should not be surprised that the experience of community (or lack thereof) for our young college friends is vastly different while they are off at college than it was for most of them during their high school situation. Certainly by all accounts, there is a dramatic shift of relational support for students venturing out of their homes (and home churches) in the years following graduation. Even the most grounded church-going students transplanted into this new field of post-high school life will experience a great deal of loneliness and loss. No one is immune to this difficulty. One author goes so far as to claim that the search for friends is so preoccupying for new college students that it seemed to be their most pressing task, “pushing the buttons for everything else.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 148–50.

Sadly for many kids growing up in our churches, they might recount that they have never really had a sense of community to lose in the first place. David Kinnaman reports, “First, most students who are likely to experience loss of faith do so before college; they begin to feel disconnected from their faith or from the church even before high school ends.”<sup>31</sup> The range of reasons for this disconnect are myriad. Many churches have not practically sought to engage students as vital and legitimate members of the Church body, whose voices should be heard and perspectives honored.

Beyond that, many times adults want students to be visible and present in corporate worship settings, but those very same adults will not venture into the settings where they would be meeting students on their own turf. Another cause for the lost sense of community is that true relationship-building fellowship, especially across generational lines, is rarely practiced in a calculated way. Thus, given today’s individualistic mindset and deprived of the experience of an indispensable biblical community at church, it’s no wonder that our students float relationally after high school.

One final example to reflect on regarding lost community is the absence of devoted adults in students’ lives. In various studies, young people voice both their desire for adult mentors, but also their lack of faith in the adults in their lives to actually step up to mentor them.<sup>32</sup> In fact, David Kinnaman points out that “a majority of the young adults we interviewed reported never having an adult friend other than their parents.”<sup>33</sup> Other researchers have noted similar findings.<sup>34</sup> There is present within this generation a great tension. While a majority of youth communicate that they have little trust in the adults,

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<sup>31</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle Locations 2326–31.

<sup>32</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 1183–86.

<sup>33</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 388.

<sup>34</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1108–1110.

these very same individuals are yearning for adult mentors and advocates. (More on this phenomenon later.) A key reason adolescents flock to their peers as their essential community is the absence of active adult advisors in their lives, with even their parents considered “inattentive and unconcerned.”<sup>35</sup>

It is true that peer relationships have always been very important to young people, but we can easily misinterpret the data if we believe that these same young people would prefer to be left alone with the “tribe apart” (Patricia Hersch) or the “world beneath”

(Chap Clark). In *Consuming Youth*, the authors profoundly make the point that:

...we have an increasing sense that today’s teenagers have few adults and even fewer institutions that are prepared to be there for them. And so it’s in the “tribe” or in that “world beneath” that youth operate in an almost default society while attempting to help each other grow up. “In short,” Dean writes, “Erikson’s theory of identity formation relied on an ingredient no longer widely available to North American young people: grown-ups.”<sup>36</sup>

With so few adults giving the attention these young people need in this season of life, it further amplifies their sense of loneliness. One can easily see that the loss of community in the Church has many detrimental effects on the faith lives of our youth.

### **Uncertain Parents**

This sense of a generation drifting from their faith is further compounded by the fact that many parents are uncertain about how to best inspire faith connections that are authentic and encouraging. Perhaps some parents were forced to be involved in church as youngsters and are trying not to set up the same domineering dynamic in their own family. Perhaps some parents are taking the laissez-faire approach to faith nurture, letting their children define their own way spiritually. Often, even the most attentive parents lack

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<sup>35</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 1633–34.

<sup>36</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 1246–51.

any guidance about how best to help faith dialogue happen with their own children. The infrequency of faith conversations in families betrays a low value on spiritual matters. Research shared in *Sticky Faith* shows that “Twelve percent of youth have a regular dialogue with their mom on faith/life issues. In other words, one out of eight kids talks with Mom about faith...It’s far lower for dads. One out of twenty, or 5 percent, of kids have regular faith/life conversations with Dad.”<sup>37</sup> Many parents do lack an awareness of the power of faith modeling in their own families. And most are without any structured curriculum from their churches to properly equip them to capitalize on these opportunities. Sadly, parental uncertainty then leads to silence and perhaps even apathy.

Uncertainty in Christian parenting is obvious in the way parents have abdicated this responsibility to the institution of the Church. For a variety of reasons, parents often see their role as being the “supporter” of the Christian education that is “centered” in the church. In this paradigm, it was expected that “the home do all it could to provide support and resources for the church to teach the faith. The home helped the church be the best it could be.”<sup>38</sup> Building a strong church was the focus, and little attention was given to building strong, faith-teaching families. As Mark Holmen further points out, over the last half-century, “there has been movement away from the home being the primary place where faith is nurtured.”<sup>39</sup> Many church programs encourage this type of “drop your kids off, and we’ll give them some Jesus and make them holy” mentality, relieving parents of their responsibility. Ultimately, this attitude greatly underestimates the values we are

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<sup>37</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1780–86.

<sup>38</sup> Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Kindle locations 1144–53.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Holmen, *Faith Begins at Home* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005), 44.

communicating to our children regarding issues of faith. Faith matters at church, young people might assume, but not so much at home.

This abdication of family responsibility can be perceived as just one small aspect of much larger issues at play in our world. Chap Clark, in his book *Hurt*, asserts very strongly that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, adolescence is best described as a season of profound abandonment where the vast majority of young people lack any sense of a “robust support system, either externally or internally.”<sup>40</sup>

In many ways these crucial years are akin to a circus life. Clark stresses that this period is a “fifteen-year psychosocial journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance... (and) that walking the ‘tightrope of adolescence’ is a long and at times treacherous experience.”<sup>41</sup> While writing decades ago, Paul Tournier also used a circus metaphor to compare the stress and anxiety of transition times in life to a trapeze artist all alone in midair with no supports or sense of safety.<sup>42</sup> Another analogy provided by Walt Mueller describes multi-tasking adolescents as “plate-spinners,” struggling to somehow find a way to balance so many difficult changes.<sup>43</sup>

There is much more to be discussed relating to the lengthening of adolescence (which many authors assert does not end until the mid-20s) and the age compression of our era (where children are experiencing adult situations at earlier and earlier ages), but in the simplest of terms, there is nothing simple about being a kid trying to grow up in this age. With such a great variety of developmental and cultural issues influencing this

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<sup>40</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4011–16.

<sup>41</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1740–42.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Tournier, *A Place for You* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), 162.

<sup>43</sup> Walt Mueller, *The Space Between: A Parents' Guide to Teenage Development* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), Kindle Locations 374–75.

challenging phase of life, nailing down a comprehensive understanding of adolescence has rightly been described as a “moving target!”<sup>44</sup>

And in the midst of such challenges, Clark maintains that the “emotional and developmental needs of the children go largely unmet” as fractured families or fragile parents are unable to provide care.<sup>45</sup> In considering some of the core issues at stake from a human development standpoint, adolescence itself was considered a season of “storm and stress” even without the complicating factors of a postmodern society.<sup>46</sup> Erik H. Erikson, in his book *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, describes the main task of ending childhood as an achievement of a true “sense of inner identity” and discovery of “wholeness” as an individual.<sup>47</sup> In the best case scenario, a young person’s emotional health and internal strength emerge “from the mutual confirmation of individual and community,” as maturity is affirmed.<sup>48</sup> When this process is halted, however, “identity confusion” can leave a struggling young person in a “moratorium” of arrested development, especially as she feels that she is without a place to belong.<sup>49</sup>

From a faith perspective, adolescence is also a season of intense “self-consciousness” as the expectations of others – and even God – are intimately intertwined with their personal identity formation.<sup>50</sup> James Fowler expands this notion by asserting that this stage of faith during the teenage years illustrates a “religious hunger for a God who knows, accepts, and confirms the self deeply.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, this aspect of their growth is

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<sup>44</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle Locations 193–99.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1001–06.

<sup>46</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 2425–31.

<sup>47</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968), 87.

<sup>48</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 241.

<sup>49</sup> Erikson, *Identity*, 246.

<sup>50</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (New York: HarperCollins, 1981), 153.

<sup>51</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 153.

simply another “mirror” that is held up to assist that young person in the process of forming their personality.<sup>52</sup> Again, Fowler points out the importance of the presence of caring individuals to be helpful mirrors to reflect acceptance as this young person progresses.<sup>53</sup>

Much more could be explored from the angle of human development, but for the purposes of this paper this cursory review helps to exemplify the acute ache of an abandoned adolescent in our culture. For so many of our young people without a nurturing network, the mirrors reflecting back to them are often warped and distorted, leaving so many struggling with measuring up in physical appearance or social popularity.<sup>54</sup> Surrounded by such skewed reflections, adolescents find themselves in a cultural “hall of mirrors” – but all the while imagining that they are receiving valid feedback and not distortions.

For a large number of our youth, there is nothing fun about this circus at all, as this just adds to their feelings of loneliness in trying to respond to these challenges. Sadly, often family dysfunction only adds to the chaos. Jim Burns puts it well when he states, “Family dysfunction and instability have a direct impact on adolescents today. In the past, the family was stress reducing; now the family is stress producing.”<sup>55</sup>

Families with spiritually ambiguous parents – busy and fractured as they are – play a role in the overarching cultural theme of abandonment. Clark alleges in a very pointed criticism that there is much relational disintegration as it relates to families. He maintains:

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<sup>52</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 151.

<sup>53</sup> Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 151.

<sup>54</sup> Ginny Olson, *Teenage Girls* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), Kindle locations 275–284.

<sup>55</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 23.

We have evolved to the point where we believe driving is support, being active is love, and providing any and every opportunity is selfless nurture. We are a culture that has forgotten how to be together. We have lost the ability to spend unstructured down time. Rather than being with children in creative activities at home or setting them free to enjoy semisupervised activities such as “play,” we as a culture have looked to outside organizations and structured agendas to fill their time and dictate their lives. The problem is not simply organized activities or sports. It is the cumulative effect that children experience as they grow up in today’s social structure. Sports, music, dance, drama, Scouts, and even faith-related programs are all guilty of ignoring the developmental needs of each individual young person in favor of the organization’s goals. Add to this the increasing amount of homework being assigned to students at younger and younger ages. The systemic pressure on American children is immense. Too many of us actually enjoy the athletic, cultural, or artistic babysitting service provided by those organizations. Even with the best of intentions, the way we raise, train, and even parent our children today exhibits attitudes and behaviors that are simply subtle forms of parental abandonment.<sup>56</sup>

These words have a very harsh tone, but as I have shared this quotation with the parents I work with, they often nod in agreement. It is very hard to admit, but as parents we are letting our kids down in significant ways. We are not consistently inspiring their faith. Throughout the last century, there is much evidence that shows some social structures (schooling, clubs, professional youth workers, etc. with their “cadre of professionals”) have actually pushed the adults and extended family even further to the sidelines, further isolating our youth from spiritual mentoring.<sup>57</sup>

We must remember, however, that we are modeling faith to our children, either by design or default.<sup>58</sup> We have much to gain by helping our families truly see themselves as the “God-ordained institution for faith-building” in young people.<sup>59</sup> If this vision is embraced by parents, they can move forward with much greater certainty regarding their role and responsibility in nurturing both faith and community for their children.

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<sup>56</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle Locations 924–33.

<sup>57</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 407–410.

<sup>58</sup> Holman, *Faith Begins at Home*, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Kindle locations 675–76.



## **Unfocused Youth Ministry**

We might be surprised that this cultural low bar of expectation also exists in many youth ministry programs within our churches. There are some pragmatic issues to be pondered. With many churches buying into program-driven ministry, youth pastors and volunteers find themselves very busy in keeping church machinery running. Slowing down enough to consider how we are actually helping our students grow and develop a network of spiritual friends as they enter adulthood can seem like a distant consideration. Further complicated by the reality of youth pastor's short tenures, it is no wonder that most churches can't seem to get their youth ministry to have a long-term perspective. No one really wants to pull out a telescope and project too far into the future if there is so much pressure to perform under the microscope to see immediate results in the here and now. Success is often measured by attendance only, or faith decisions only, and so considering other outcomes that materialize down the road is lost. As Duffy Robbins reflects, "The biggest questions in youth ministry are always focused on the future: *'Where will they be five years from now, ten years from now, twenty years from now? Is this a fire that won't burn out?'*"<sup>60</sup>

In a recent conversation with a youth pastor colleague, he confessed his worry that he wasn't proving his worth since his youth group had actually shrunk in size since his recent arrival. For my friend, all the pressure was about providing results in the short-term: attendance and activity and beautiful testimonies of kids actually growing in their relationship with Jesus. However, there wasn't an articulated youth ministry vision that led to any kind of long-term hope for the faith of their graduates. At best, the upcoming

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<sup>60</sup> Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*, Kindle locations 2568–70.

season on the other side of graduation was considered only occasionally; it was blurry and off in the distance.

So if we become too accustomed to using a magnifying glass to enlarge only what is happening in the present, we will most certainly not think much past our noses into the future. Unfortunately, for many youth pastors, they won't really internalize and wrestle with the intensity of the post-graduation struggles of their students until the data becomes personal and some of their dearest disciples wander away from their faith. Our youth ministries desperately need a greater appreciation of the gravity of this challenge in order to become passionate about resources that can help. If we seek to graduate stronger disciples ready to endure in their faith, we must realize there is too much at stake for our churches to continue down a blurry path.

A greater emphasis on the high calling of a faith that endures must be embraced by everyone who wants better for our grads. This scriptural high calling means investing in a congregational commitment (both as parish and parents) to fully prepare students by living out faith-forming fellowship. Our church can strive to become “unstuck,” our parents can become more certain of their role as spiritual influencers, and our youth ministry programs can focus on fostering a faith that sustains. Only by regaining a proper biblical understanding of community will we be able to raise the bar for our young people. In the next chapter, we will dive deeper into a biblical understanding of community and how it significantly relates to this issue. As we gear up for this exploration of our profound need for fellowship, let this quotation from J.I. Packer set our course:

We should not ... think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotion. We should

recognize rather that such fellowship is a spiritual necessity; for God has made us in such a way that our fellowship with himself is fed by our fellowship with fellow-Christians, and requires to be so fed constantly for its own deepening and enrichment.<sup>61</sup>

We are called to be fed constantly by fellowship we have with our Father *and* fellowship we have with God's people. *There is hope as we take seriously the promises of God!* If we don't want the fire of faith to burn out for our students, then we need to do all that we can to fan that flame. We can set a pattern of relational support that sways them to stay in the midst of the fellowship with other believers. We can awaken our young people to this need for fellowship, so it's high time to raise the bar!

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<sup>61</sup> Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), Kindle locations 766–73.

## CHAPTER TWO

### BIBLICAL BACKGROUNDS: MAKING THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY

“In their loneliness, both the visitor and the one visited recognize in each other the Christ who is present in the body. They receive and meet each other as one meets the Lord, in reverence, humility, and joy. They receive each other’s blessings as the blessing of the Lord Jesus Christ. But if there is so much happiness and joy even in a single encounter of one Christian with another, what inexhaustible riches must invariably open up for those who by God’s will are privileged to live in daily community life with other Christians!”

– Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*

“Recognizing the Christ who is present.” I cannot think of a more wonderful way to introduce the theme of community at this point in our study. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was passionate in his quest to challenge believers of his day to know the “inexhaustible riches” that are experienced in doing life together with other followers of Jesus. It is almost as if he is speaking directly to the ache of our struggling teenagers, those lost in their loneliness. Community, in a world fractured and disconnected, brings hope!

In seeking to answer the key question, “What is church community?” Bonhoeffer responds, “God probably intends for only one thing to remain with us, God’s Word, sacrament, and promise. We ask for nothing else, because from giving us this there springs the incomparable gift of genuine community in faith, prayer, intercession, in mutual ministry, forgiveness, confession, discipline, and recognizing our sins and the mercy of Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Here, Bonhoeffer touches upon so many essential aspects of spiritual fellowship. At the heart of his argument, though, is the clear conviction that genuine community itself is an “incomparable gift” that is intimately connected to the

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), Kindle locations 3127–3132.

mercy of Jesus Christ. In our best efforts to comprehend this great gift of community, a balanced investigation of multiple viewpoints regarding Christian fellowship will now be conducted.

In order to respond to the challenges highlighted thus far in this thesis, it is now essential to consider the biblical and theological underpinnings regarding Christian community. Since the very premise of this thesis is built on the conviction that long-lasting, life-changing personal faith ownership can only happen in a healthy environment of supportive relationships, this will be the central motif of our examination. In fact, I share the conviction of Gordon Smith as he points to the fullest vision of the Christian life by declaring, “We cannot know the grace of God in isolation from Christian community.”<sup>2</sup> Smith continues, “...we must do all we can to avoid any suggestion that we can be united with Christ and not be in dynamic fellowship with the faith community. Conversion is not merely a conversion to Christ; it is also an act of initiation into Christian community. Christian faith is distinctly social.”<sup>3</sup>

As we will discover, many in our churches would agree that fellowship is all about being “social,” but the biblical witness reveals that this community life goes well beyond simply being friendly on the surface and into the realm of being deeply spiritual.<sup>4</sup> Larry Crabb details the discouraging notion that churches are “rarely communities,” insisting that our congregations are often not much more than “social machines that run

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<sup>2</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), Kindle locations 1996–2000.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 3150–56.

<sup>4</sup> Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), Kindle locations 1950–53.

smoothly for a while, break down, then are fixed so they run smoothly again.”<sup>5</sup> In our hearts and minds, however, we know that our experience of faith is meant to be so much more than simple machinery. And while there are times that “the social dimension of fellowship provides an entrance into the spiritual dimension” of Christian faith, too often we choose the shallow waters of community, missing out on the deeper kinds of connections that truly change us.<sup>6</sup> To best contrast the practice of much of contemporary church-life (wading into the shallow end of the pool) with the high calling of what fellowship is truly meant to be (diving in deeply), a thorough inquiry into both theological and scriptural themes will be conducted.

Several key foundations will be researched to take into account specific scriptural references, as well as how these perspectives have been applied theologically, to look at the theme of fellowship. While this chapter is far from exhaustive in its study, six crucial strands will be employed in the task of making the case for community as followers of Christ. At its core, the very complexion of Christianity is about relationship -- with God, others, and all creation -- and so these strands will help to craft a fuller vision of fellowship to be embraced and applied to the contemporary concern of young people departing from their faith.<sup>7</sup> Seen in its ultimate expression, there is so much to be disclosed about faithful fellowship. Stanley Grenz goes so far as to say that community itself is the “goal of God’s program for creation.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing Group, 1999), Kindle locations 179–83.

<sup>6</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle location 1994.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1996), 23–24.

<sup>8</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 23–24

First, the very nature of God will be investigated in terms of understanding how – from the very opening verses of the Old Testament – community has been given as both a model and a calling for God’s people. Second, the example of Jesus himself as a master community builder and the initiator of a gathering of followers will be considered. Third, the pattern of faith lived out and experienced in the context of family will be discussed. Fourth, the New Testament concept of fellowship – or *koinonia* in Koine Greek – will be surveyed. Fifth, several practical applications found in scripture will present a direct challenge for the entire Church to take seriously the vision to connect as deeply with each other as we do with Jesus himself. Finally, a brief overview of the scope of salvation history will be scanned to truly highlight that many, if not most, of our barriers to truly discovering a life fully connected to God and others must be understood in terms of the brokenness of our own lives and of those around us. Within each of these scriptural pictures of relational connections, there are many ramifications to be considered for us in our present age. The remainder of this thesis will then build upon the theological foundations that have been established to demonstrate the biblical validity of the “connecting the dots in community” model.

Again, these are only a few of the various themes that could come into play, but as these strands are tied together, one thing will be made ultimately clear: Scripture certifies that personal faith ownership is to be married to a deep experience of community. As the Bible narrates what it means to be a follower of Christ, it fully makes the case for community, nudging us to embrace that we are to be disciples following Jesus together. In this chapter, I will not dedicate any detail work toward a scriptural definition of church (*ekklesia*), but instead narrow the focus to the motifs listed above,

especially relating to a word study on fellowship (*koinonia*). Other angles could be further explored (covenant people, Israel's unique calling as the people of God, etc.), but this study will remain concentrated on the emphases already stated above. In several ways, this is an effort to get to the particulars behind the generally accepted truth that faith itself is a relational endeavor, actively lived out with God and others. This concept will serve as a framework for the various strands to then be woven together to create a more extensive picture of fellowship, a kind of tapestry featuring God's vision for his people.

It is a common slogan in contemporary evangelical circles that the Christian faith is more about "relationship than religion," but our grasp of exactly what this means seems cloudy at best. I would go as far as to say that most of us have a severely incomplete depiction of exactly how this claim has intense implications for every area of life. So then, simply reflecting on the fact that many of us could not truly talk about *both* a life-giving relationship with God himself and a faith-supporting relationship with God's people the Church, we must admit that there is much work to do to view this differently. The overall theme of community in Scripture is indeed a high calling in a low bar world.

It is amazing to consider how warped our present concept of faith is in this regard, almost completely devoid of any need of real community. Any sense of belonging to a church or connecting to others in our faith is so often considered simply superfluous.<sup>9</sup> Even in some of the traditional ways that we have challenged people to come to faith in Christ has driven a "wedge between Christ and the church," as Robert E. Webber criticizes, ultimately leading to "the privatization of faith."<sup>10</sup> Only with the proper biblical

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<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 2491–95.

<sup>10</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 240–42.



background in place will we be able to fully grasp what is at stake for the emerging generation that doesn't understand its need for fellowship. This sets a vital groundwork for the practical ministry implications to be reviewed in the following chapters of this thesis.

Jerry Bridges points out that there is “a much-needed corrective to our tendency toward an individualistic approach to the Christian life.”<sup>11</sup> We can only rightly adjust this approach when we engage it biblically and theologically. When we do so, I believe that we will find that there is great evidence to use community to describe the core of our faith – and to appreciate the fact that we have greatly undervalued this amazing gift from God.<sup>12</sup> When we grasp the great significance of fellowship, we recognize that “there is no room for self-absorbed individualism” in how the Bible approaches our relationship with God and each other.<sup>13</sup> It is only through a faith-filled understanding of community that we can both see and experience the richness of its variety. Otherwise our efforts in religion will only, in the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “remain individualistic and atomistic.”<sup>14</sup>

For those of us who are fully immersed in the realm of youth ministry, one would think that community building within our youth groups is frequently our priority task, given how often we give lip service to the term “community.” Jim Burns points to and affirms that which is at the heart of many youth ministries:

One of the major goals of any youth ministry should be to provide a supportive community of fellowship. Most youth ministry activities should be planned around the goal of building community. Frankly, the first and foremost reason that students come to a youth group is to make friends, and this is a perfectly

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<sup>11</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 83–86.

<sup>12</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 731–32.

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 2898–99.

acceptable reason. Although many students have a genuine desire to grow in their faith, friendship is usually first on their list. Deepening Christian friendships lead them to grow in their faith.<sup>15</sup>

But does our practical theology actually move beyond just helping students be social with each other and take them to a place where they are actually growing in their faith? At a deep level, then, it is the task of this chapter to illuminate the theological principles behind a stated value of seeking the best for youth in parachurch and church settings. How we think about faith and God (*theology*) makes a difference in our behavior. Stanley Grenz is absolutely correct when he declares, “Each of us is a theologian, just as God intended. Consequently, our question is not ‘will we be theologians?’ but ‘will we be good theologians?’”<sup>16</sup> It is vital that we strive to be good theologians in the arena of youth ministry as we achieve a deeper understanding of Christian fellowship.

### **Making It Personal**

As I think back on my own personal story theologically, the balance of faith in community and personal faith ownership was beautifully encouraged. I was 14 when my church celebrated our confirmation and I remember the day of our service at the beginning of summer. My entire class of more than 20 students was all decked out in white robes with red carnations as we waited anxiously in the church’s Fellowship Hall while our family and friends filled up the sanctuary. We had been in confirmation preparation classes for two years, which had really been my first consistent experience of being part of a church.

My youth pastor, T.J., gathered us prior to the service, and I will never forget what he said. “Make your faith your own,” he started. “Don’t just go through the motions

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<sup>15</sup> Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 236.

<sup>16</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 24.

today or don't just fake it because your mom or grandma wants you to. This is your chance to personally respond to following Jesus." I am certain, of course, that this kind of invitation to follow Jesus had been communicated dozens of times at countless Sunday school classes, church camps, or events; but for me it was the first time that I remember hearing the invitation directed to me so powerfully and personally.

And so it was in the midst of our confirmation service that I fully said "Yes!" to Jesus as my Lord and Savior for the first time. For me it was a powerful experience of ownership in a very personal way. At the same time, however, I was kneeling at the altar of our sanctuary with two dozen other friends who were also being invited into the same journey of discipleship. We recited the Apostles' Creed together, sang songs together, and celebrated together the next steps of our faith. And we were surrounded by a congregation as well, blood relatives and church family, gathered in joy, cheering us on, and prayerfully supporting our faith.

This experience of personal faith ownership anchored in community has been so very formative in many ways as I look back on it. I am grateful for how God used that entire congregational environment to lead me to himself. This is a superb illustration of the response of faith that Paul discusses in Romans:

But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." (Romans 10:8-13, NIV)

As we will discover in several key New Testament passages highlighted in this chapter, the “you” in this text is plural. The invitation to declare (“confess”) “Jesus is Lord” is an invitation to a community response. Again it is so clearly reinforced that the Christian faith is never meant to be an individual endeavor! Looking at the many metaphors used in scripture to point to the Church and Christian fellowship, we see time and again the realization that faith is a corporate experience. With faith anchored in community, visualized in myriad illustrations, it is incredible that we still need a reminder of this fact. Paul Minear makes clear that, “Just as there is no use of saint in the singular, so too there is no private or individualistic ethics in the New Testament.”<sup>17</sup>

I believe that only a deeper comprehension of the community aspect of Christian faith will help us respond to the ache behind the need for true fellowship for every believer, young and old. N. T. Wright demonstrates this truth in this way: “The church is first and foremost a community, a collection of people who belong to one another because they belong to God, the God we know in and through Jesus.”<sup>18</sup> Throughout the work of this chapter, we will discover many different strands of observing fellowship in action. By doing so, we will build the case for community that has profound ramifications on how we can be more intentional about doing life together as believers, especially as we seek to send faithful students into the world after graduation.

### **The Relational Nature of the Christian Faith: A Case for Community**

At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses

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<sup>17</sup> Paul S. Minear. *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 139.

<sup>18</sup> Derek Melleby, *Make College Count* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Kindle locations 775–78.

to reveal him. Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.” (Matthew 11:25-30, NIV)

“Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection...Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws but because we let go of seeking perfection and, instead, seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives. Spirituality is not about being fixed; it is about God’s being present in the mess of our unfixedness.”

– Mike Yaconelli, *Messy Spirituality*

Often in evangelical circles, pastors and teachers are fond of echoing this sentiment: “Christianity is all about a relationship, a relationship with Jesus.” I cannot help but wonder, however, how much thought we give to this radical statement. In some ways we have become so accustomed to the language of “personal relationship” with Jesus that we are numb to the implications – and unaware of the ways in which all other relationships in our lives are meant to be redefined by this primary connection to God. Especially as we wrestle with a biblically informed understanding of Christian community, it is essential that we declare that this relationship is indeed at the core of the Christian faith, but it is more than simply *just* a relationship with Jesus.

Scripture often illustrates this relationship with God in and through Jesus Christ by describing the dynamic of “knowing Jesus.” As seen above, Jesus himself reflects on the relational nature of his invitation as “knowing the Father” by having the Son reveal God to us. And the power and scope of this invitation to come to Jesus is a *salve* (from the same English root word as “salvation”) to those who are “weary and burdened.”

When I think of both the personal struggles and the overall atmosphere of the emerging

generation, this invitation is so poignant – and speaks to the very core of their need for belonging.

A brief survey of some central passages that highlight “knowing God through Jesus Christ” in the New Testament further reinforces the relational perspective of Christian faith.

After Jesus said this, he looked toward heaven and prayed: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him. Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent. I have brought you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.” (John 17:1-5, NIV)

For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all God’s people, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Ephesians 1:15-23, NIV)

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3:7-11, NIV)

While this is only a small sample of the passages that speak of knowing God, it exemplifies the relational nature of Christianity at its core. And we cannot miss the depth

of the meaning of “knowing” in the original Greek language. The Greek word (*ginosko*) is found over 200 times in the New Testament. Its meaning is wide, as well as deep, signifying: “to learn to know, come to know, get a knowledge of; passive to become known...to know, understand, perceive, have knowledge of...have an intimacy with...to become acquainted with.”<sup>19</sup> Compared to our normal English connotation, “knowing” in Greek is really much more relational than informational in its context. It even has a connotation of being a Jewish idiom for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman, which is used by Mary in this sense of the word in Luke 1:34.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously, this is so much more than what we would describe as “head knowledge” or a collection of facts about something. Stanley Grenz alludes, “When we know God, we have gained more than a body of truths. Rather than merely possessing a list of statements about God, we enjoy fellowship with the living, personal God. From this relationship, lofty declarations about God take on new meaning.”<sup>21</sup> The impact of such a reality is far-reaching. If we only saw our personal relationship with God as the beginning of a greater invitation to relationships with other believers, we could more fully appreciate the crafting of a network of belonging by connecting the dots in community.

At the core of Christian believing then – what Jesus called “eternal life” in John 17:3 – is knowing God through Jesus Christ. Grenz elaborates:

Nevertheless, we also adamantly maintain that God can be known. Although our knowledge of God is always partial, we know God as he actually is. Our Lord himself has declared that through him we truly come to know God (John 17:3). But how does this “knowing God” come about? We know the Self-revealing God.

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<sup>19</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, “Koinonia,” <http://biblehub.com/greek/1097.htm> (accessed on January 15, 2015).

<sup>20</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, “Koinonia.” (accessed on January 15, 2015).

<sup>21</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 37–38.

We know God ultimately only as God comes to us—only as he gives himself to be known—only as God reveals himself to us. We know God, therefore, because God takes the initiative.<sup>22</sup>

God has revealed himself to us in and through Jesus Christ and our sharing of this revelation with others in community (via church, campus ministry group, or family) is the divinely intended setting for our ongoing growth in a life of faith.

The tricky part for contemporary Christians is to not stop the play after the opening act. We have to want to discover the whole story here. Scripture clearly makes the case for community that is born out of this central relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Consider how Jesus responds in this scene from the Gospel of Matthew:

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:34-40, NIV)

Love for God with all that we are is intimately linked to love of neighbor. Relating is the way of faith! And as we will discover in the various theological strands that follow, this fact of faith has both vertical and horizontal effects. In fact, Grenz again comments:

And what is the goal of knowing God? According to the Bible, God’s ultimate desire is to create from all nations a reconciled people living within a renewed creation and enjoying the presence of the Triune God. This biblical vision of “community” is the goal of history. But it is also the present—albeit partial—experience of each person who has come to know God.<sup>23</sup>

For us to move beyond conceding and giving up when it comes to lost community and the floundering faith of so many young people today, we must take a serious look at the

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<sup>22</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 38.



high calling of scripture to see the overall relational nature of our faith and translate this theological truth into practical experience within our churches.

In striving to understand the depth of the priority for the Church to live out faithful community together, we need not diminish a personal relationship with Jesus in any way. But it must be made clear that an incomplete picture of the relational/spiritual journey that God has called us to will always be a distorted picture. The effort to do the necessary exegetical work to make the picture more complete is definitely difficult, but absolutely worth it. The Bible makes the case for community in various ways that must be explored. In fact, when we truly embrace the significance of our faith found in community, we will also find that our personal relationship with Jesus will be enhanced because it is in the context of belonging to others that we best live out our belonging to Christ.

Only when our students actually observe our churches taking to heart God's heart for our fellowship together will they have a very clear sense of what fullness of the Christian life is all about. Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10, NIV). Standing in contrast to the destructive, life-robbing ways of the thief, Jesus describes his mission in terms of being life-giving. And Paul agrees when he declares, "In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life" (1 Timothy 9:19, NIV). This life touches every corner of our existence and is impossible to minimize. For the purposes of exploring biblical community, it's evident that the very setting of faith and life in Jesus can be described in a word: relationship.

It is difficult to miss the far-reaching effects of the relational nature of the Christian faith. And from the standpoint of scripture, in both testaments, our faith builds a case for community. N.T. Wright beautifully illustrates this point by writing, “Aristotle glimpsed a goal of human flourishing; so did Jesus, Paul, and the rest. But Jesus’s vision of that goal was larger and richer, taking in the whole world, and putting humans not as lonely individuals developing their own moral status but as glad citizens of God’s coming kingdom.”<sup>24</sup> The vision of Jesus is one which sees his followers connecting together as they connect to him.

To balance these relational dynamics of the Christian faith, we must recognize that either side without the other is left wanting. For those raised in a church where there was no invitation to personal faith ownership, no seeking out a love relationship with Jesus, we must assert that we all need moments where each one of us make individual commitments to confess our faith – and then grow in that faith (Rom. 10:8-9). In the same way, those who have been told the only thing that matters is one’s personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that the Church is just an optional part of faith must realize they are truly being deprived of something precious. So we must contend that community is the necessary environment in which faith in Christ is planted – again to grow and flourish.

As Michael Horton reports of the imbalance of the latter perspective, “The focus of such piety is on a personal relationship with Jesus that is individualistic, inward, and immediate. One comes alone.”<sup>25</sup> What a great irony that the very loneliness that Jesus

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<sup>24</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2010), 36.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 163.

heals as part of his redemptive action is just replaced with a different kind of loneliness that downplays community. Horton goes on to describe how this approach to spirituality is also ultimately influenced by feelings. He continues unpacking this faulty perspective and describes the caricature by stating, “My personal relationship with Jesus is mine. I do not share it with the church. Creeds, confessions, pastors, and teachers – perhaps not even the Bible – can shake my confidence in the unique experiences that I have alone with Jesus.”<sup>26</sup>

Again, the ultimate injury of this false dichotomy of either/or approaches to the relational nature of faith is that there is no need for conflict between the two. It should be both/and. Another excellent point made by Horton is as follows: “Far from setting the church against individual experience of Christ, confessional Protestantism has recognized that all of our experience with Christ is communal, historical, and mediated through ordinary creaturely agency. Echoing the church father Cyprian, Calvin said, ‘Whoever has God for his Father has the church for his mother.’”<sup>27</sup>

Connection with Jesus *and* connections with others is the only accurate way to faithfully articulate the Christian worldview. Ponder this familiar passage from John 15:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in

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<sup>26</sup> Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 163.

<sup>27</sup> Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 231.

you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.” (John 15:1-17, NIV)

There are several dynamics from this passage that must be regarded in making the case for community. First, we must again grasp the importance of grammar in the Greek language. In every instance where the word “you” appears in this text, it literally means “you all” – 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural. Jesus is speaking to all his disciples as a community and not to one individual. (This one grammatical discovery revolutionizes the way we read practically all of the New Testament, so we must pay attention to the way in which our cultural obsession with the individual twists many of our perspectives on scripture.) Second, when you take into account the very image of a vine and branches, obviously Jesus desires for his followers to see that there are many branches connected to him as the one vine. Third, Jesus goes on to link *both* love for God and love for others as essential to fruitful and faithful living.

While there are other significant ways found in scripture to discern the relational angle of our faith, this cursory search makes plain that the Christian faith is relational in both a personal way with Jesus and a fellowship way with other believers. The case for community is clear throughout the New Testament and it is essential that we embrace the

magnitude of this fact. The remainder of this chapter will now pursue the variety of strands in both theology and scripture that further demonstrate the need for Christian community to be embodied and exercised in practical ways. Our failure to do so has in great part put us in the predicament we are in today, with lackluster and lost faith defining much of the emerging generation who has grown up in church.

Therefore, with a greater sense of clarity about the call of scripture regarding the relational nature of the Christian faith, we can now determine with greater passion that intentional investment of our churches is needed to both teach and demonstrate faith anchored in community. This must be a high priority. Parents too can be motivated to re-establish their key role as the primary faith nurturer of their own children and discover the part that they play in supporting faith as relationally driven. And as students understand and are trained up in both personal faith ownership and a commitment to corporate Christian community, they will gain confidence knowing that they can keep such a faith growing beyond their teenage years.

### **The Case for Community: The Very Nature of God**

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3, 4, NIV)

Because God is “community”—the fellowship shared among the Father, Son, and Spirit—the creation of humankind in the divine image must be related to humans in fellowship with each other. God’s own character can only be mirrored by humans who love after the manner of the perfect love which lies at the heart of the Triune God. Because God himself is triune, we are in the image of God only as we enjoy community with others. Only as we live in fellowship can we show forth what God is like. Ultimately, then, the “image of God” is a social reality. It refers to humans as beings-in-fellowship.

– Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community*

In considering the different strands that make the case for Christian community, it is fitting that we continue by looking at the way scripture discusses the very nature of God: in relational terms. Indeed, the very nature of God – from the opening verses of the Old Testament – has been described in community terminology and is given as both a model and a calling for God’s people. As Stanley Grenz remarks above, we are most fully found in the image of God “only as we enjoy community with others,” since that is a reflection of God’s own character.

Gilbert Bilezikian makes a strong case that biblical imperative of community is found in the opening sentences of the Old Testament. Seen in the Trinity, God is a “community of oneness. Indeed, the first three verses of Genesis reveal that God is a community of three persons in one being”<sup>28</sup> Bilezikian goes on to declare that “God’s supreme achievement was not the creation of a solitary man, but the creation of human community.”<sup>29</sup> In God’s very nature is seen the indispensable interconnectedness of many into one. So for the Church, the ongoing expression of community is essential. “The making of community cannot be a side issue or an optional matter for Christians,” Bilezikian continues, “It is as important to God as one’s individual salvation. Without community, there is no Christianity...Community is central to God’s purposes for humankind.”<sup>30</sup> This perspective stands in stark contrast to the dominant inclination of many of our churches, where the prioritizing of a personal relationship with Jesus so overshadows the practice of community with others. Surely fellowship might be considered a secondary aspect of faith, but it is sometimes a very distant second.

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<sup>28</sup> Gilbert Bilezikian, *Community 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997), 16.

<sup>29</sup> Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 35.

I am often puzzled about why there is such inconsistent emphasis in much of our biblical teaching regarding fellowship and community. Such a great difference could be experienced in our churches if we too shared an equal conviction and passion about personal faith *and* true fellowship. Bilezikian elevates his treatment of this topic by exclaiming, “Community is not a human invention or a mere social convention, or even less a solution of separation for group survival. Community is God’s dearest creation.”<sup>31</sup>

As God’s children created in God’s very image (Genesis 1:26, 27), we are also bidden to know intimate relationships with others in a way that reflects the Trinity.

Stanley Grenz points to this dynamic of community by declaring:

As we enjoy the fellowship God intends for us, we are the image of God. But ultimately the enjoyment of fellowship is no mere private, individual experience. On the contrary, the fellowship God intends for us is a shared experience. And therefore, the divine image is likewise a shared, corporate reality. It is fully present only as we live in fellowship. It is ours only as we enjoy “community.”<sup>32</sup>

Seen more specifically in the definition of *koinonia* (which will be further explored soon), we are invited into a participation in the “divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4) of God’s interconnectedness and interplay within the Trinity. Grenz states that “knowing the Triune God lies at the heart of our Christian experience” and that we can actually say that God is “community since the Father, Son, and Spirit...enjoy perfect and eternal fellowship” together.<sup>33</sup>

There is ample evidence of the different ways that the three persons of the Trinity encourage and nurture community for believers. Stanley Grenz expresses:

At the heart of the Christian message is the good news that the Triune God desires to bring us into fellowship with himself, with each other, and with all creation. I believe that this biblical vision of community—this core set of beliefs—can

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<sup>31</sup> Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 43.

<sup>32</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 79.

<sup>33</sup> Bilezikian, *Community* 101, 52.

provide the foundation for truly Christian living, as we are drawn by the Holy Spirit to live on the basis of this vision.<sup>34</sup>

If only we could bring this powerful vision of community into focus in our churches and youth ministries, we would then truly discover that community in this sense isn't just about what we believe or how we connect together. It is about providing a setting that helps us practically live out our faith together. Grenz continues to impart the stunning truth, that when we are together with other Christians with this great awareness, it is "no ordinary reality...Our fellowship is nothing less than our common participation in the divine communion between the Father and the Son, mediated by the Holy Spirit."<sup>35</sup>

N. T. Wright describes the "*telos* or goal of all our pilgrimage is for the glory of God."<sup>36</sup> Not only is this reflected in our calling to join with others as a "royal priesthood," but it also means that "the living God himself comes to dwell in fulfillment of his ancient promise. Both parts of this were realized by Jesus himself...Some people say that the early Christians had no trinitarian theology, but that position can be sustained only by carefully putting the telescope to the blind eye."<sup>37</sup> Through this analysis on the very nature of God, we can truly "see" with eyes of faith the tremendous ways that community describes God himself.

### **The Case for Community: The Model of Jesus**

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

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<sup>34</sup> Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Bilezikian, *Community 101*, 216.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 176.

<sup>37</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 176.



praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47, NIV)

“Therefore, by looking at the risen Christ we discover that God’s purposes stand in stark contrast to our present human experience: God did not create us for estrangement but for fellowship; not for death, but for life; not for bondage, but for freedom. God’s pattern for us is also revealed in Jesus’ earthly life. Jesus of Nazareth is the revelation of how we are to live.”

– Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community*

With the strong footings of a biblical definition of fellowship established in our sharing life in relationship with God in his very nature, we can now visualize how this is lived out in our relationships with each other, based on the very model of Jesus. In both his earthly ministry and his ushering in of the new community that would become the Spirit-empowered Church, love extended through relational connections. And this was the evidence of the people of the Way. Obviously, the second chapter of Acts is seen as the birth of the Church, both in the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the establishment of the key markers of Christian community. These markers begin a habit of devotion to four practices, one being “fellowship.” It was the model of Jesus that pointed his gathered followers to a communion with the Father, and this communion directed and guided their interactions with everyone else.

This communion with the Father was part and parcel of the ministry of Jesus from the earliest passages of the New Testament. The fellowship of God as Trinity is present at the baptism of Jesus. “As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” (Matthew 3:16, 17, NIV). The very identity of Jesus as the Son of God illustrates the intimacy that Jesus experienced in relationship with the Father.

Jesus expands this relational intimacy as he gathers around him a cadre of followers. In the calling of the first disciples in Matthew 4, they were invited into a life of apprenticeship – which was as much a commitment to relating with your master as it was for learning a trade. Those first disciples were so drawn to Jesus that they left everything behind to join him in his journey. Their response to the invitation to “come, follow” was simply a step of obedience, a response to a call to relationship. This is yet to be their profession of faith in Christ, but rather a sense of being overwhelmed by a graceful acceptance that seeks to connect them to the one who gives the invitation, Jesus himself.<sup>38</sup> Their step of obedience does lead them into a trusting relationship with Jesus that is alongside the eleven other disciples. Bonhoeffer magnifies the core of their obedience as a step of faith enabled by grace much more than a logical response to some religious cause or impulsive emotional pursuit. He articulates:

With an abstract idea it is possible to enter into a relation of formal knowledge, to become enthusiastic about it, and perhaps even to put it into practice; but it can never be followed in personal obedience. Christianity without the living Christ is inevitably Christianity without discipleship, and Christianity without discipleship is always Christianity without Christ.<sup>39</sup>

Yet again, at its core, Christianity is about a relationship with Christ.

The first disciples were enamored by their master in the quality of the relationship that Jesus had with his Father. In the gospel narratives, I believe that the disciples of Jesus constantly saw him operate relationally upwards and then outwards, as we can see in a number of occasions. Jesus prayed to the Father before choosing his disciples (Luke 6:12). He had a habit of spending time in communion with the Father each morning

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<sup>38</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone, 1959), 56, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, 59.

(Mark 1:35). So intrigued by the excellence of the rapport with his heavenly Father, the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray in a similar fashion (Luke 11:1).

Simultaneously, Jesus is also demonstrating the conviction that God is with us to help us be with each other. He set the pattern of interconnectness with his disciples in a way that not only trained them up to participate with him in his ministry, but ultimately came to define them as men who had “been with Jesus.” The prepositional phrase “with” seems like such a minor part of speech, but in the gospel story it communicates volumes! In Matthew’s narrative of the foretelling of Jesus’ birth to Mary, the name of Immanuel is bestowed upon Jesus, which means “God with us” (Matthew 1:23, Isaiah 7:14). The model of connecting that Jesus put into motion with his disciples was accompanied by signs and wonders that left all amazed, convinced that truly God was with them. The crowds were amazed at the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 7:28). The disciples were amazed at the way that creation itself obeyed their master, the stilling of wind and waves (Matthew 8:27). “The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame walking and the blind seeing. And they praised the God of Israel” (Matthew 15:31, NIV).

In the model of Jesus, they observed a compassionate shepherd (Matthew 9:36). They watched one who mourned with those who mourned (John 11:35). His disciples even witnessed their rabbi show a willingness to ignore cultural taboos to include those who were far from God into his circle of friends. A woman at the well (John 4), a persistent Canaanite woman (Matthew 15), a sinful woman who anointed his feet with perfume (Luke 7)...and countless other stories of Jesus making connections and inviting others into the midst of an emerging community. The enemies of Jesus accused him;

“The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners’” (Luke 7:34, NIV).

His mission to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10, NIV) was lived out relationally, and it came through his preaching of the good news (Mark 1:38), his miraculous healings and miracles (Mark 3:10), and his sacrificial death on the cross. And through it all, his band of followers were in his presence. He even modified the accepted understanding of what family meant to include his wider community. <sup>49</sup> Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. <sup>50</sup> For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matthew 12:49, 50, NIV). And in the center of the community that Jesus assembled, his echoing words can be heard: “Whenever two or more of you are gathered, I am there in your midst” (Matthew 18:20, NIV). Throughout his earthly ministry, Jesus gathered others around himself in a way that demonstrates spiritual fellowship and makes a case for community.

Jesus even went so far as to communicate his need for his friends. In the garden of his own suffering, he needed companionship and begged his disciples to watch and pray with him (Matthew 26:36-46). Even in his own vulnerability, he is teaching about the need for community. And there’s that word again: “with.” Early in the days after Pentecost, Peter and John were standing before the Sanhedrin, in trouble for causing a disturbance with the gospel message of Christ. The power of their witness rested almost entirely on their “with-ness.” The narrative reads, “‘Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.’” When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had

been with Jesus” (Acts 4:12, 13, NIV). They had been *with* Jesus. Dallas Willard states powerfully:

But if I am to be someone’s apprentice, there is one absolutely essential condition. I must be with that person...To follow him meant, in the first place, to be with him...Jesus accordingly took great care to instruct his immediate students— both before his death and in the interval between his resurrection and ascension— about the specific manner of his presence with them (and with us) during the long period ahead. He wanted them to understand very clearly before he left them exactly what it would be like.<sup>40</sup>

And his presence would be the model for their sense of community even after his resurrection. Those who followed Jesus during his season as an itinerant preacher were warmly welcomed and invited to share in his community by his graceful call to “come.”

Bridges does a masterful job of diving into the depth of what this kind of sharing is about in our community with each other:

An understanding and appropriation of our union with Christ will also enhance our community relationship with one another. Fellowship is, after all, not a mere sharing of biblical truth with each other or just having a good social time together; fellowship is sharing a common life in Christ. Only to the extent that we understand and appropriate the life we have in Christ will we be able to share that life with others.<sup>41</sup>

Jesus extended grace to all he met and he modeled this community of grace to his followers. Dietrich Bonhoeffer illustrates this point when he states, “the goal of all Christian community is to encounter one another as bringers of the message of salvation. As such, God allows Christians to come together and grants them community.”<sup>42</sup> In and through the model of Jesus this is accomplished.

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<sup>40</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997), 276.

<sup>41</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 388–393.

<sup>42</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 758–64.

The model of Jesus was thoroughly relational and a model for fellowship that the early Church adopted and emulated. Again, Grenz beautifully summarizing the importance of community to Jesus:

For Jesus, foundational to life-in-community is life in community with the Father. The fellowship he shared with God included both communing with God in solitude and humbly acting in perfect obedience to the Father's will, even to the point of death (Phil. 2:8). Jesus also lived in community with others. Our Lord was no self-sufficient recluse. Nor did he embody the Western ideal of "the self-made man." Rather, for him life included both mutuality of friendships and compassionate ministry to the needy.<sup>43</sup>

Life was about relationships for Jesus! The interplay between the attention given to nurturing his relationship with his *Abba* and the intention that was directly to his disciples to follow his lead simply shows the powerful fellowship that surrounded Jesus. Grenz concludes his thought by reflecting:

Jesus was both the "man for others" and the one who received the gift of friendship from others. And Jesus showed that community ought to know no boundaries; it reaches beyond friends to encompass the outcast and hurting, even one's enemies...As his disciples, we are to pattern our lives after him. That is, we too are to seek to live according to the design of life-in-community Jesus revealed to us.<sup>44</sup>

Patterning our lives after Jesus, according to his design of "life-in-community" is relating intimately to the Father and then translating this life-giving connection into practical connections with others around us.

Bridges rightly asserts that "the full-orbed practice of true community involves responsibilities and actions that do not come naturally to us," and yet we rely on our fellowship with God to supernaturally inspire our fellowship with others.<sup>45</sup> Again, I harken back to opening remarks of this paper by Paul Tournier. Our natural inclination is

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<sup>43</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 121.

<sup>44</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 121.

<sup>45</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 388–393.

for independence, not fellowship. But life modeled by Jesus, where an intimate sharing of communion with the Father is made habitual and then the creation of intimate connections with others is also made habitual, points to a better way, and truly makes the case for community.

### **The Case for Community: The Model of Jesus Continues in the Body of Christ**

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says:

“When he ascended on high,  
he took many captives  
and gave gifts to his people.”

(What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.  
(Ephesians 4:1-16, NIV)

“We noted that the early believers saw themselves as a special people, a group united together because they had been called out of the world by the gospel to belong to God. The New Testament writers referred to the church as a nation, a body, a temple. And although this people transcends spatial and temporal boundaries, it is chiefly manifested in a visible congregation of believers who band together to be the local expression of the church. This means that the church is a “community fellowship.” The church is more than a loosely related group of people. We share a fundamental vertical commitment—loyalty to Christ—which

shapes our very lives. But our common allegiance to Jesus, in turn, forms a bond between us that is greater than all other human bonds... This felt bond adds a horizontal commitment to the vertical. Our common allegiance to Jesus draws us together. Because of our loyalty to him, we are committed to each other.”

– Stanley Grenz, *Created for Community*

Now is an appropriate time to give attention to a major motif in scripture, the Body of Christ, as a continuation of the model of Jesus in the ministry of the early Church. One might organize this aspect of our faith in any number of ways, but for our purposes in this paper, the body of Christ imagery fits nicely as an extension of the ongoing ministry of Jesus Christ. Grenz again gives a clear starting point, “Together we are to carry on Christ’s own ministry and be his physical presence on earth.”<sup>46</sup> As Paul emphasizes throughout the themes of Ephesians 4, we have received a high calling to live and love like Jesus. And unity is to set the stage for our very grasping of the gifts and roles that each of us are to play in the gathered community of believers. The reason for our giftedness? “So that the body of Christ may be built up...” (Ephesians 4:12 NIV). So that unity will be reached, knowledge of Jesus attained, maturity of faith accomplished. This short reflection barely skims the surface of the intricacies of the text. But for our purposes of seeing how the early Church maintained the momentum of spiritual community after pattern of Jesus, this will suffice.

Thus, the generation of believers that Jesus left to be his witnesses (empowered by the Holy Spirit, as seen in Acts 1:8) had learned from Jesus the way of relationships. They were sent out together in the task to continue his work by being, in the words of Dallas Willard, the “special and unfailing community he established on earth.”<sup>47</sup> While there are diverse metaphors that seek to describe this reality in the New Testament, Paul

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<sup>46</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 209.

<sup>47</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 291.



especially draws upon the portrayal of God's people being the body of Christ. Some go so far as to say that this association with body language is the Apostle Paul's favorite image of the church.<sup>48</sup> Scripture on several occasions links the community life of believers to the very "body of Christ" (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, Ephesians 4). This image is a powerful reminder of the interconnectedness of fellowship that God envisions for those who follow. The intimacy of such a representation lived out is demonstrated powerfully as Paul writes, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (1 Corinthians 12:26, NIV).

The Church is called to be the body of Christ, with active hands and feet continuing the healing work of Jesus in the world, but doing so always connected with each other. Bonhoeffer maintains, "We belong to him because we are in him. That is why the Scriptures call us the body of Christ."<sup>49</sup> Bridges then takes this viewpoint to the next logical step by declaring:

There is a mutual ownership of one another: I belong to you and you belong to me, and we each belong to all the other members of the body....This is experiential fellowship, the biblical practice of *koinonia*. But it can occur only when the members of the body recognize that they are in objective fellowship — that they do share a common life in Christ with one another.<sup>50</sup>

This design of community found in the lives of the early believers is obviously empowered by the coming of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, one must believe that the quality of their relationships was also a carry-over of the way in which Jesus related to his disciples. The pattern used by Jesus to create a spiritual community was obviously transformational, so of course this model would be sustained by his early followers. The

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<sup>48</sup> Phil Yancey, *Church: Why Bother? My Personal Pilgrimage* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998), Kindle locations 648–49.

<sup>49</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 776–78.

<sup>50</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 654–660.

passion of Jesus to pursue relationship was so intense that it is meant to be a marker for those now connected by faith to him in his body, the Church. Phillip Yancey expounds:

I believe that we have, in 1 Corinthians, a record of Paul thinking out loud, trying out ways of describing this thing called Church. Each new metaphor casts a different light on the subject, and the last one, the body, seems the most accurate description of all. Paul spends an entire chapter exploring physiological parallels, and his letters return to that same metaphor of body more than two dozen times.<sup>51</sup>

Through the experience of “body life,” the mystery of the ongoing relational model of Jesus has been demonstrated in the worshipping practices of the Church for the last 2,000 years. Sacramentally speaking, in both baptism and communion, we are joined in the mystery of the life of Christ made real for us. It must be repeated that these vehicles of grace are definitely offered to individuals, but *always* in the context of the community. Dallas Willard describes this aspect of our faith in this way: “Because of this reciprocal nature within the corporate body of Christ, fellowship is required to allow realization of a joyous and sustained level of life in Christ that is normally impossible to attain by all our individual effort, no matter how vigorous and sustained.”<sup>52</sup> The sacraments are physical representations of spiritual realities of grace in our lives. But again, this isn’t to be experienced alone. Willard continues:

The members of the body must be in contact if they are to sustain and be sustained by each other. Christian redemption is not devised to be a solitary thing, though each individual of course has a unique and direct relationship with God, and God alone is his or her Lord and Judge. But The Life is one that requires some regular and profound conjunction with others who share it. It is greatly diminished when that is lacking.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 429–35.

<sup>52</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1988), 187.

<sup>53</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 187.

In our life of worship together, “the habit of the heart is being formed: a community that together intends to work on faith, hope, and love.”<sup>54</sup> This leads us to live with greater conviction as we learn to exercise our corporate faith muscles. And it gives us a community identity to pronounce to the world. N. T. Wright comments:

We are not a random collection of people doing strange things because this is what our families and friends have always done, even though we’ve all forgotten why. We are members of the body of Christ, taking our place in the story of Jesus Christ, and the ongoing purposes of the God he called Father, finding ourselves called to learn the art of genuine humanness by worshipping him and working for his kingdom in the world.<sup>55</sup>

So how do we pursue God in such a way that we are working for his kingdom in the world together? We must take care to not become too fixated on our experience of fellowship as the sole fuel for right worship. As A. W. Tozer describes:

So one hundred worshippers met together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be were they to become "unity" conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified. The body becomes stronger as its members become healthier. The whole Church of God gains when the members that compose it begin to seek a better and a higher life. All the foregoing presupposes true repentance and a full committal of the life to God. It is hardly necessary to mention this, for only persons who have made such a committal will have read this far.<sup>56</sup>

In bringing closure to this section on body life, Ray Stedman argues, “It is the sharing of life that makes a body different from an organization. An organization derives power from the association of individuals, but a body derives its power from the sharing of life.”<sup>57</sup> Taking this argument to the next level, Dr. Bernard Ramm observes:

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<sup>54</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 278.

<sup>55</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 283.

<sup>56</sup> A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publications, Inc., 1968), 69.

<sup>57</sup> Ray C. Stedman, *Body Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Discovery House Publishers, 1972), Kindle locations 589–600.

When modernists deny . . . a supernatural connectedness of all believers by the mystical union of the Holy Spirit, they destroy the historic, orthodox Christian understanding of the Church. . . . [Thus] the Church becomes a society, a natural, human, non-supernatural religious community. It is bound together by purely natural ties, such as a common heritage in the Bible, a common belief in some sort of uniqueness in Jesus, a common belief in the historical continuity of Christians, and a common ethic of love. Now the church is a society. But this is secondary to its being the supernatural body of Christ.<sup>58</sup>

The supernatural body of Christ is another key strand, in tandem with the model of Jesus as the creator of vital Christian belonging, which merges with these various biblical and theological foundations to simply overwhelm us with the graceful way of God. God's great desire for relationships to miraculously form mutual support and encouragement, as well as transformational and growing trust in a connection with Jesus, is being worked out at times even in spite of us! Perhaps we must relent and know that the clumsy way in which fellowship is imperfectly lived out is most definitely trying and certainly a test. However, at the same time, these struggles do not take away from the fact that it is the clear witness of scripture that the model set by Jesus makes the case for community.

### **The Case for Community: The Pattern of Faith Lived Out in Family**

God sets the lonely in families,  
he leads out the prisoners with singing;  
but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land. (Psalm 68:6, NIV)

“Their family is the church, their vocation is a grateful response for the chance to participate in the divine plan of salvation, their hope lies in the fact Christ has claimed them, and secured the future for them. If we, the church, lived alongside young people as though this were true—if we lived alongside anybody as though this were true—we would be the community Christ calls us to be. That would be more than enough.”

— Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*

Another key strand discovered in scriptural standards of community revolves around the pattern of faith lived out and experienced in the context of family. Family, too,

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<sup>58</sup> Stedman, *Body Life*, Kindle locations 589–600.

is God's idea, God's creation. And family is another key metaphors for community as God intends for each of us, as seen in any number of key references (Galatians 6:10, Hebrews 2:11, 1 Peter 2:17, 1 Peter 5:9, 1 Thessalonians 4:10). Not only is God our loving parent, but God's desire is for each of us to live out intimate relationships of sibling support with others. Again, starting in the opening chapters of scripture, in the midst of God looking at all that was created and calling it "good," the very first thing that was deemed "not good" was for man to be alone (Genesis 2:18). And so Eve was created to be a partner to Adam, a helper for his journey in the garden with God, and the family was established. And since the beginning of the Church, we are still called to be helpers to one another, knit together in community as a family. Phillip Yancey drives home this point well: "The New Testament stubbornly presents the church as being more like a family than an institution."<sup>59</sup>

Within this theme of the Church as family, intentional family faith is another motif found in community of Israel that was formed. Found in the great Shema prayer that is core to Jewish practice, the passing on of an experience of family faith is communicated:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NIV)

Making an impression is the calling of every parent in matters of faith. This prayer was recited twice daily in Jewish homes, a habit reminded them that faith is being formed on

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<sup>59</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 628–29.

the homefront, where community is family. In the daily routines of the life of a family, faithful conversations are strategically inserted. When we are sitting, we remind our children of the commandments of God. When we are walking on the road, we remind our children of the commandments of God. When we are tucking in our children at night and giving them our blessing, we remind our children of the commandments of God. When we are waking them up at the start of the day with a smile, we remind our children of the commandments of God. We can even hang up physical mementoes in our homes to bring us back to the promises of God which are to be on our hearts. And at the crux of it all is the command to love God with all that we are.

Reggie Joiners says, “The power of the Shema is that it establishes God as the central character of a story that connects every generation, every family, and every individual to God’s goodness.”<sup>60</sup> Research shows that these impressions do indeed stick. In fact, parents are the greatest faith influencers of their children, for good or ill.<sup>61</sup> Sadly today, though, most Christian parents simply don’t have a clue about the reality of their impact on the faith of their children.<sup>62</sup> But that we can embrace this reality and allow it to grow into a hopeful vision in very practical ways should be urged in our congregations, complete with a pledge to help support parents along the way.

One key reason why it is so necessary for our families to regain their God-given perspective has to do with the fact that our families are really struggling. For many families, their loneliness is only accentuated by their busy-ness and driven-ness. As Tim

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<sup>60</sup> Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2009), Kindle locations 715–16.

<sup>61</sup> Chap Clark, *Daughters and Dads* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 114.

<sup>62</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle locations 1101–2.

Keller cites, “Instead, the family has become the nursery where the craving for success is first cultivated.”<sup>63</sup>

In our contemporary society, there are myriad cultural forces which complicate and diminish the family’s potential to be an environment for healthy community. David Wells points to the globalization of our world and high mobility of our nation and pointedly asks:

What is the bottom-line effect of it all? What is the psychological impact? It is loneliness. Loneliness is the modern plague. This is the plague of being disconnected, of not being rooted, of not belonging anywhere in particular but to everything in general. It is the affliction of being alone, of being unnoticed, of being carried along by an indifferent universe. Commitment – actual commitment, real bonds, a real sense of belonging, not just the idea of commitment – has become a precious stone, rare, much sought after and, when found, treasured. That we experience so little sense of belonging, and have no natural communities of which we are a part.<sup>64</sup>

Again the echo of Tournier’s initial challenge remains so relevant and striking.

“Loneliness is the modern plague.” But the cure to that plague is not more talk about community and commitment to our relationships like a family. We must move beyond talk to action. Without digging into the practical ministry details of the *Think Orange* movement (led by Reggie Joiner and others), we must recognize that they are in many ways returning to an ancient way of nurturing faith – by joining the synergy of the family and the faith community to inspire personal faith growth and ownership. As Reggie Joiner writes, “I am convinced that no other entity is more strategically positioned to illuminate God’s grace to our culture than the church. At the same time, no other entity

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<sup>63</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 78–79.

<sup>64</sup> David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2008), Kindle locations 454–58.

has more potential to demonstrate unconditional love than the family. God initiated them both as part of His design to show the world who He is.”<sup>65</sup>

Certainly our families need great encouragement to more fully step into their role to inspire faith in their children for the long-haul – and churches need constant nudging to connect as a family relationally. Scripture points to the calling of family faith investment in several different ways. There are specific admonitions, like Paul’s request of parents, where he writes, “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4, NIV). And then there are those examples of faith which set up the relational nature of the Church as a family and exhibits the parental role of those who serve as leaders and mentors. Again, Paul illustrates this in the book of 1 Thessalonians, where he displays:

We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority. Instead, we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well. Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you. You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory. (1 Thessalonians 2:6-12, NIV)

“As a mother...” “As a father....” Paul even pictures his mentoring of Timothy in terms of a father and son (Philippians 2:22). Certainly it is clear that the theme of family is a necessary strand to consider in making the case for community. Later in this paper, more attention will be given to the practical ministry impact of this reality, but for our purposes

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<sup>65</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 3118–3121.



in this matter, it is enough to state that family is an apt parallel to the fellowship that God creates for us.

### **The Case for Community: The Power of “*Koinonia*”**

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We write this to make our joy complete. (1 John 1:1:4, NIV)

Any serious consideration of the biblical foundations of the community must certainly take into account a dissection of the New Testament concept of fellowship. In scripture, the word most frequently translated as “community” is the Greek word “*koinonia*.”<sup>66</sup> A thorough survey of the frequent uses of *koinonia* has profound implications for both the personal faith ownership that this paper is hoping to stimulate *and* the sense of connection that believers have among themselves. Several crucial angles describe how *koinonia* is used interchangeably in *both* directions, vertically in our relationship with God and horizontally in our relationships with others. This speaks volumes and highlights a vastly underdeveloped perspective of our faith. Some study of the specific ways that this terminology further illuminates the unique calling into Christian community will only further drive home the point that this concept need be firmly grasped and broadcast in the midst of our ministries and churches.

As 1 John 1:3 makes abundantly clear, *koinonia* (fellowship) can be applied simultaneously to both our relationships of belonging around us and our belonging to God. Jerry Bridges demonstrates that the Bible most often translates *koinonia* as “sharing

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<sup>66</sup> Baker’s Evangelical Dictionary, “Koinonia.”

a common life with other believers — a life that, as John says, we share with God the Father and God the Son. It is a relationship, not an activity.”<sup>67</sup> Again the relational roots of Christianity are firmly planted in scripture and illustrated here.

One key author who has added tremendous perspectives on Christian community is Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Primarily in his work *Life Together*, the passion of Bonhoeffer is strikingly evident. He echoes the priority of Christ being at the center of our experience of community. Bonhoeffer states, “The Christ of Life Together is the binding force of that community in its ‘togetherness,’ gracing Christians to go beyond the superficial, often self-centered, relationships of their everyday associations toward a more intimate sense of what it means to be Christ to others, to love others as Christ has loved them.”<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer himself defines Christian community as “community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ...(and) ultimately a vicarious living out of the relationship to Christ accepted in faith, a relationship that always includes the necessity of relating to the church founded in Christ as the new humanity.”<sup>69</sup> The most impressive aspect of the witness of Bonhoeffer is that he was doing so much more than just writing about Christian community, he was seeking to make “life together” real and tangible in very creative and experimental ways in his own life.<sup>70</sup>

*Koinonia* is most often defined as “fellowship, association, community, communion, joint participation, contact, intimacy” and describes the sharing that happens between people.<sup>71</sup> *Koinonia* is found nineteen different times in the New Testament. The

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<sup>67</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 99–101.

<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 341–44.

<sup>69</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 2975–82.

<sup>70</sup> Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2010), 262.

<sup>71</sup> Thayer’s Greek Lexicon, “Koinonia.”

basis of such relationships is a communion that begins with a joining of Jesus with his followers. When deep sharing happens and spiritual participation between believers is realized, a common ground is discovered and *koinonia* becomes real.

The minimalization of the word fellowship to its lowest common denominator is one of the great crimes of lazy hermeneutics and practice of faith in the Church. Sadly, most people do associate “fellowship” to mean, in the words of Jerry Bridges, “little more than various forms of Christian social activity.”<sup>72</sup> But it should be *both/and* – what we share with God and what we share with others. I remember helping a high school student named Lyle prepare for a message after a mission trip and we were focusing on the high priestly prayer of Jesus in John 17. Lyle became animated as he discovered that the unity that Jesus was praying for was both vertical and horizontal (“...that they may be one as we are one...” John 17:22, NIV).

Lyle went on to construct a “unity cross,” an intersection of the word unity itself being spelled out in the shape of a cross, with the “I” being literally “cross” point. This is exactly the kind of weight that is carried by the term *koinonia* throughout the New Testament. It is a sharing of the life of Christ – with God and with other, a full participation in all that our faith is meant to be. It is about a relating to and sharing with God – at the very same moment relating to and sharing with each other. It is a mysterious and mystical and miraculous event and experience. In trying to best organize an understanding of biblical fellowship, it is helpful to know that *koinonia* is what we share with God and what we share with others.

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<sup>72</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 60–62.

### **“Koinonia”: The Thing We Share with God**

As a starting place, it is helpful to see *koinonia* as the experience of what we share with God. In several of the key passages that cite *koinonia*, this picture of relational personal connection is clear. As stated above, 1 John 1:3 particularly talks about *koinonia* in terms of a sharing of life with God the Father and Jesus Christ. In other passages (Philippians 2:1 and 2 Corinthians 13:14) there is the linking of *koinonia* with a connection to the Holy Spirit as well.

Bridges expresses “Biblical community is first of all the sharing of a common life in Christ. It is when we grasp this truth that we are in a position to begin to understand true community.”<sup>73</sup> Fellowship, then in the most biblical understanding starts and stays with God, even as we observe it expanding to our horizontal relations as well. But to consider having a deeper spiritual depth of connection with each other, we must acknowledge, that the “foundation for our *koinonia* with one another” is built on one thing alone: fellowship with God.<sup>74</sup>

Further on in the book of 1 John, the apostle again powerfully illustrates that true fellowship with God is about an ongoing connection that is like “walking in the light” and creates the reality for us to know real connections with others. The passage reads, “If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:6, 7, NIV). For many Christians from more traditional settings, this is a key part of the liturgy.

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<sup>73</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 109–13.

<sup>74</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 188–89.

It is amazing to consider that for most believers, they would be unable to articulate that the word “fellowship” is such an influential dynamic in scripture and practice of faith.

In our modern experience of being involved in church, we have so easily veered away from authentically grasping of what this really looks like. We get caught up instead on a variety of other spiritual routines. None of these are bad in and of themselves, but they are minor fringe benefits of a life lived out fully connected to Christ and others. Thus, as Bridges points out, “Our emphasis today is on doing things for God, or on believing the right doctrines about Him. But few believers take time to commune with God simply for the sake of enjoying Him and adoring Him. In the Church today, there seems to be very little of that thirst for God described in Psalm 42:1: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God.”<sup>75</sup> When we stay busy with just being religious, our souls dry up! We need to wake up to our thirst, to our spiritual dehydration and know that in our busy-ness we must comprehend our need and cry out to be filled.

Paul Tournier is marvelous at conveying the difference in the life of a believer who wholeheartedly knows that their relational center is found in Christ as their most significant place of support. Tournier distinguishes between believers and unbelievers by saying:

The difference between them, however, has far-reaching implications. Consider! That same God, all-powerful and perfect, who reigns supreme over the immensities of time and infinite space; that same God who invented universal gravitation, atomic power, and the human brains is capable of discovering their laws so as to be able to use them; that same God who invented physics and chemistry, life and all the phenomena we observe in the tiniest cell – that same God is interested in men. He has implanted in their hearts an aspiration to know him; he speaks to them, reveals himself, loves them and wants their love. Much more, he is personally interested in me, in every detail of my life, rejoicing in my

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<sup>75</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 556–59.

joys and grieving over my sorrows. We say all this as if it were quite simple, but there are times when I think it seems incredible!<sup>76</sup>

The word “incredible” just doesn’t seem to do this reality justice! God is indeed interested in me personally and by name. What a word of hope, one which our hurting world sorely needs. In sharing life vertically in our relationship with our heavenly father, we connect to the great power source that makes true fellowship between myself and others possible. If I truly believe that he is personally interested in me and incredibly communicates his delight in me in such a deep sharing of life, I cannot help but reach out to also share life with others.

### **“Koinonia”: The Thing we Share with Each Other**

In turning the view of koinonia ninety degrees, to a horizontal direction, we are persuaded that there is much intensity in the belonging that we have with each other when it is established in the belonging we have with God himself. Again, it is reminiscent of the metaphor of the body of Christ found in such a poignant articulation of the case for community. Bridges powerfully concludes:

With such a diversity of topics, how can we tie them all together? Is there a common thread, a single idea that will enable us to begin to apply all that we have learned intellectually about koinonia? Yes, there is. The foundation of daily experiential fellowship among believers is found in Paul’s statement that “in Christ ... each member belongs to all the others” (Romans 12:5). I belong to you and you belong to me, and we each belong to and have “ownership” in every other believer in the world. This mutual belonging to one another is the thread that ties together all the seemingly diverse elements of fellowship.<sup>77</sup>

When we live out body life in this kind of dramatic way, the effects are tremendous and far-reaching. Larry Crabb describes it this way:

How important is the Christian community in helping people deal with their problems? I am radically pro-community. I believe that under the terms of God’s

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<sup>76</sup> Paul Tournier, *A Place for You* (New York: HarperCollins, 1968), 204.

<sup>77</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 2025–34.

New Covenant with humankind, the Holy Spirit has graciously placed resources in every Christian that, when released from one person and received into another, can promote substantial healing and change. A connecting community, where each member is joined together in dynamic spiritual union, is a healing community.<sup>78</sup>

If only we truly believed that we have everything we need in the promises of God, lived out in the people of God which surround us (2 Peter 1:3).

Again, this stands in such stark contrast to much of what might be termed the “broken default” of contemporary Christianity and Church. Michael Horton cites a study by George Barna that suggests “that most Americans value time and efficiency over everything else, minimizing long-term commitments, maintaining ‘independence and individuality at all costs,’ even to the point of being skeptical of institutions, people, and authorities.”<sup>79</sup> Think of the profound *contrast* between this perspective and full-fledged faithful community! Even in the Church, our viewpoint is so skewed from scripture’s vision of belonging to one another while we simultaneously belong to Christ. And this is about so much more just worship service or youth group attendance! Gordon Smith states:

And while one might still attend church and be active in a Christian community, the individualism of one’s conversion fosters a sense that the church is nothing more than the sum of its parts, a collection of members, of individuals. Such a Christian lacks a covenant relationship with the community of faith, lacks a sense of vital dependence or, better, mutual dependence upon the community, lacks a sense of oneself maturing in the faith “as each part” does its work...<sup>80</sup>

It is so vital that we not lose the impact of this reality. Again, Bridges forcefully illustrates for us the logic of the flow of *koinonia*, as he writes:

This vertical aspect of fellowship (union and communion with God) provides both the foundation and the pattern for the horizontal aspect (fellowship among

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<sup>78</sup> Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community*, Kindle locations 299–303.

<sup>79</sup> Horton, *Christless Christianity*, 31–32.

<sup>80</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 248–51.

believers). A community relationship among believers presupposes a living relationship with God and is, in fact, dependent on it. Where there is no vital union with Christ, there can be no sharing of the common life that believers have in Him. In the same manner, if believers are to share with one another in communion, they must first have something to share, something obtained only through communion with God. As we now turn our attention to the horizontal aspects of community — the sharing of the common life and the sharing with one another that flows out of that life — let us keep in mind that it is all made possible by our vertical fellowship with God.<sup>81</sup>

That flow of shared life, first from relating to God and then relating to others begins to mutually reinforcing the other! This sharing of this life with each other, while being wholly spiritual, is also tremendously practical. Scripture uses *koinonia* in several instances to discuss specifically meeting the physical needs of others.<sup>82</sup>

Meeting needs with each other is significant in other ways as well. Speaking specifically about the discipline of confession, Dallas Willard states: “Confession alone makes deep fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial quality so commonly found in our church associations. What, though, makes confession bearable? Fellowship. There is an essential reciprocity between these two disciplines.”<sup>83</sup> Later in this thesis, much focus will be given to the habit of Christian accountability and the role of intentional and committed partnership to make fellowship real and transformational.

The authors of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* also correctly underline how practical the applications of fellowship are in ministry, since, “the problem has been that Christians often never get beyond the social dimension of fellowship. Thus, we need a balanced emphasis on the Church as a caring community, as a partnership in the gospel,

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<sup>81</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 616–621.

<sup>82</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 1369–1372.

<sup>83</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 188.



and as a body of believers who mutually build up one another spiritually and share with one another materially.”<sup>84</sup> This is an excellent segue into the ways in which *koinonia* is a concept that must be recaptured for contemporary youth ministry to make the greatest impact. The apostle Paul writes:

If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, if being in a community of the Spirit means anything to you, if you have a heart, if you care— then do me a favor: Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand. (Philippians 2:1-4, The Message)

The tone of this passage, beautifully placed before the illustration of sharing the same attitude of the self-sacrificing savior Jesus, clearly demonstrates the invitation to gratefully invest in relationships of belonging around us. We are cooperative in this spiritual community. If we choose to withhold our love and affection for the others in my midst, we choke off the Spirit’s ability to see fellowship truly flourish. N. T. Wright declares, “Any Christian fellowship that lacks these is hardly a Christian fellowship: and when you see the spark of any of them, like the small glow at the back of the fireplace, blow gently and bring it into a small flame, then feed the flame with more fuel until the whole fire comes to life. That’s how it’s done.”<sup>85</sup>

Scripture unmistakably points to the indispensable encouragement that we need found in the context of fellowship. To live out our faith, community is very thing we must experience to even grasp the depth of how to practically grow in the “grace and

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<sup>84</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle locations 1950–53.

<sup>85</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 210.

knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” (2 Peter 3:18, NIV) Paul crafts this sentiment in the following:

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people. (Philemon 4-7, NIV)

In many ways, this passage is a perfect wrap-up for the discussion of *koinonia*. Not only is our “partnership” with other believers meant to be helpful in taking in all the blessings of a relationship with Jesus Christ, Paul reinforces that the very context within which we discover these blessings is *with* each other in community. Clearly, the power of the biblical term *koinonia* makes the case for community in such a way that we must certainly pursue it in all its fullness.

### **The Case for Community: Practical Challenges for Relational Connections**

Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:23-25, NIV)

An additional strand that conveys the case for community found in scripture is the multiple practical applications of committed connections within the fellowship that strengthen and bolster the spiritual reality that is being experienced in true community. Whether lifted up in practical wisdom (“Two are better than one...” Ecclesiastes 4:9-12) or lived out in actual relationships (such as the over fifty different “one anothers” found in the New Testament), scripture is abundantly full with clear imperatives that call for a vision of our faith journeys lived out together.<sup>86</sup> And these examples are deeply spiritual

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<sup>86</sup> Stedman, *Body Life*, Kindle locations 2138–2146.

in nature; intentional acts of faith with deeper consequences.<sup>87</sup> However, our commitment to living up to such a high calling is often tested. The writer of the book of Hebrews makes it clear that human nature has a habit of letting relationships disintegrate.

Again, the deep sharing of biblical fellowship is much more than just showing up. Being present to one another certainly creates an environment for connecting to happen, but there must be an openness and vulnerability for something more. It takes risking relationally. “This cannot be done sitting in pews, row upon row, listening to the pastor teach,” writes Jerry Bridges. Bridges continues:

It can be done only through the mutual interchange of admonishment and encouragement. This is not to diminish the importance of the teaching ministry of our pastors; the Bible makes it quite clear that their ministry holds a vital place in our lives (see, for example, Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Thessalonians 4:1; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; 2 Timothy 4:2). But we need both the public teaching of our pastors and the mutual encouragement and admonishing of one another. It is the latter that seems to be the main thrust of Hebrews 10:24-25.<sup>88</sup>

The Hebrews text is a direct challenge to us in the midst of this generational drift we’ve been discussing. Aside from the myriad of other cultural dynamics that make connecting such a foreign concept for us, we must recognize that we need a commitment to stay connected. We can’t simply look at the nature of our culture and its disinterest in Christian community as an excuse to be lazy in tending to our most significant relationships. We must recognize the direct link between community and holding onto our faith, always remembering that these go hand in hand.

I’m encouraged to hear from students who have intentionally gotten plugged into ministry in their new college setting. They are often open about the fact that it wasn’t always easy or comfortable, but simply worth the effort of making new relationships and

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<sup>87</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle location 777–79.

<sup>88</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle location 791–95.

support happen. As we prepare our youth for their transition, they need to hear the themes from this critical Hebrews text. The upsides of such a mature faith are easy to see if we are passionate about communicating it to this generation. “Step up and hold on to your faith unswervingly! Speak up and encourage each other in word and deed! Show up and keep meeting together, even if your peers bail on such commitment! And keep it up, continue meeting together through the ups and downs of this time of transition in your life!” This message needs to be more than just spoken. It needs to be lived out among our high school students in such a way that its influence makes its way into their expectations as they mature.

Congregational faith, then, must find ways to influence both families and individual believers in practical ways. While attempting to produce true community in the life of a congregation, in many ways it is much easier said than done. Joseph Meyers states, “Community is a complex creature.”<sup>89</sup> He goes on to raise some challenging myths about belonging. Belonging isn’t simply a matter of more time together, more commitment to each other, more purpose, more personality, more proximity, or more small groups.<sup>90</sup> These will indeed be factors that affect community, but it is much more mysterious than that. It is essential that each of our congregations discern for themselves the unique ways that they want to do life together as a family and live out their calling to connection.

And we must remember to recognize that relationships are hard work! As stated earlier, God is obviously at work, but we are invited to work and invest as well. In examining this reality, N. T. Wright pens, “Community is vital, but all members must

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<sup>89</sup> Joseph Myers, *The Search to Belong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 11.

<sup>90</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 12–17.

make it their own.”<sup>91</sup> Within this quotation we again see the dual dynamic of community *and* individual responsibility. Like every other aspect of our faith, this is meant to be an ongoing habit and discipline. It is in the living out of this routine that we really apply both our personal faith and our investment with others in fellowship. When this habit of continuing to meet together – to be devoted to each other *relationally* – begins to wane, our corporate witness as the body of Christ is robbed of its greatest influence.

What do we communicate to the world as the Church? What is seen? It has been stated that “the church doesn't have an apologetic; it is an apologetic.”<sup>92</sup> The witness of the Church is vital, not only to nonbelievers who are watching, but also to the young who are growing up in the midst of our church families. These children will most likely not have a neutral experience of the authenticity of community. And the quality of this experience will have a tremendous impact on the trajectory of their next steps of faith.

I think immediately of a young man named Aaron. When we first met, Aaron told me that his relationship with his parents was beyond fractured. His mother had struggled with drug addiction for years and had never been his primary care-giver. His father was a successful businessman and mixed-martial arts fighter who had tried to mold Aaron to follow in his footsteps. But the anger and alcoholism of his father had so broken things that Aaron had been emancipated since he was seventeen. Aaron was living fully on his own, but his tough exterior sometimes showed cracks.

Brooke (who I wrote about in this paper's introduction) was a friend at school who saw through the cracks and reached out to Aaron. If you ask Aaron how she communicated care to him, he'd say her consistent listening and open invitation to join

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<sup>91</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 144–45.

<sup>92</sup> James Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 29.

our youth group. Aaron would routinely decline, but after a short stint in a juvenile detention facility, he said he knew he had to check out church with Brooke.

Now when you ask Aaron to describe his experience of being plugged in to youth group, he can sum it up in one word: “Family.” In spite of his sleeve tattoos and a huge muscular physique, he was received without judgment and felt an attraction to the peers and adult leaders who were interested in him without an agenda. It is amazing to hear from such an outwardly intimidating young man that church used to be scary to him. It is life-changing to hear from the same young man that he truly feels connected and loved in the midst of our church. Jesus said that the world will know that we are his followers by our love for each other (John 13:35). When we live out our faith in practical ways, people can see a difference and it forces them to ask some deep probing questions about ultimate things, about God.<sup>93</sup>

In many ways, we anecdotally hear about how many people turn away from pursuing God because the churches they have grown up in have failed to validate the love of God by the witness of their love for each other in community and their love for others in the world at large. Larry Crabb establishes:

The future of the church depends on whether it develops true community. We can get by for a while on size, skilled communication, and programs to meet every need, but unless we sense that we belong to each other, with masks off, the vibrant church of today will become the powerless church of tomorrow. Stale irrelevant, a place of pretense where sufferers suffer alone, where pressure generates conformity rather than the Spirit creating life – that’s where the church is headed unless it focuses on community.<sup>94</sup>

The issue at stake here is much greater than the issue of the ongoing strength of the faith of this emerging generation. However, the two are interrelated. The clear call of scripture

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<sup>93</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 218.

<sup>94</sup> Myers, *The Search to Belong*, 19.

makes evident that the followers of Jesus are to be a family, a fellowship whose quality of relationship models the very nature of God. We need to find both philosophical and practical ways to recapture this vision again, and then watch the profound impact that this focus will have on our young people as they are launched to “holding unswervingly to the faith” that they profess.

### **The Case for Community: Our Broken World’s Need for Fellowship**

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And glory has come to me through them. I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one. While I was with them, I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled.

“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” (Jesus in John 17:6-17, NIV)

The complexities of what is known as “the high priestly prayer” of Jesus in John 17 are tremendous. But one thing is clear as Jesus prays for his disciples: they are sent into a world that desperately needs the gospel truth of Jesus Christ. Throughout the witness of scripture and the history of humanity, there is a deep brokenness in the midst of the world; one which actually sets those in the world separated from God, in a state of rebellion. As we connect the reality of this brokenness to the motif of Christian

community, we discover that fellowship itself diagnoses our need for both God and others as much as it serves as one aspect the cure for the ache of brokenness. This will be the final strand in our examination of community: seeing the very need of our world in terms of relational connections of faith.

The scope of salvation history has been articulated in any number of ways. Perhaps one of the most helpful ways to consider the biblical narrative is in terms of creation, fall, and redemption. With the willful breaking off of fellowship between God and humanity due to the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden, brokenness has become the norm in our world. Curses abound, not just in our individual choices, but also in our culture and in our very character. And all of this has a profound effect on the potential for community.

To adequately build the case for community found in scripture, attention must be given to the variety of ways that God's use of community is a vital remedy for the ongoing healing of the brokenness of our lives. It is only in a life fully connected to God which is also fully connected to others that we find an environment for us to have our lives "put back together." Thinking about the scope of salvation history is an important task to determine how the life of the Church is being true to its calling to bring life and life abundant to those who follow after Jesus Christ.

There are many different aspects of the arc of God's saving work in the world which truly highlight our need for fellowship. It is vital that we understand, as Albert Wolters states, that the Christian faith uniquely demonstrates that "grace restores nature" because "the redemption in Jesus Christ means the restoration of an original good



creation.”<sup>95</sup> Wolters expresses these core tenets around “three fundamental dimensions: the original good creation, the perversion of that creation through sin, and the restoration of that creation in Christ.”<sup>96</sup> Seen from this powerful perspective, it is clear to affirm, again in Wolters’ words, that “the whole point of salvation is then to salvage a sin-disrupted creation.”<sup>97</sup>

At creation, God created everything *good* (Genesis 1). Even humanity was declared, along with the entirety of creation, “very good” (Genesis 1:31). But the narrative doesn’t stay in a place of bliss. In the midst of the garden, Adam and Eve desired to “be like God, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5, NIV), and in their disobedience, separation became part of the human condition. Because of the fall then and the prevalent sinfulness in our lives, we are all separated from God. Dallas Willard accurately describes our brokenness in this way: “(This is)...the general posture of fallen humankind. Humans are not only wrong, they are also wrung, twisted out of proper shape and proportion.”<sup>98</sup> But it is within community that God’s great design is to put us back together, right in our relationship with him as well as others. A key aspect of God’s great purposes is to form for himself a people, a community where the rift between himself and humanity could be mended.<sup>99</sup>

Many authors have even framed the issue of sin as technically the breaking of God-given community. Thus, as Andrew Root and Kenda Dean show, “we can taste death most fully and painfully in estrangement. Persons were made for God and each

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<sup>95</sup> Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (2nd ed.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005). 12.

<sup>96</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 12.

<sup>98</sup> Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, 63.

<sup>99</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 492–96.

other, for community. The reality of the sinful world is the tragedy of broken community with both God and neighbor.”<sup>100</sup> Stanley Grenz takes this verdict to the next level by showing that the “dark side of the human condition” is failure to “reflect the divine community...a failure to live in fellowship with God, each other, and all creation.”<sup>101</sup> While we were created to be friends with God, “even his children,” Grenz succinctly emphasizes that the “sin of our first parents marred the pristine fellowship of the Garden for all time.”<sup>102</sup> And so we still live in the aftermath of that initial rebellion – and the ongoing damage that we inflict relationally on each other in our brokenness. Bonhoeffer reflects on the ironic dynamic between wrongly motivated relationships and our brokenness as follows: “In reality they are not seeking community at all, but only a thrill that will allow them to forget their isolation for a short time. It is precisely such misuse of community that creates the deadly isolation of human beings.”<sup>103</sup>

How will we then rightly use and experience community as God intended? This will only happen through a relationship with Jesus Christ and with others following Jesus together. Again Paul refers to the image of the body of Christ as he encourages the church in Colossae to let the gospel message of Christ teach the community how to best be community.

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:15-17, NIV)

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<sup>100</sup> Andrew Root and Kenda Creasy Dean, *The Theological Turn in Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), Kindle locations 1792–94.

<sup>101</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 90.

<sup>102</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 97.

<sup>103</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 1865–1872.

The heart of this text is simply amazing! We are called to live in responsive gratitude for all that God has accomplished through the saving work of Jesus Christ. In doing so, every single thing that we do and say are to be considered in light of our relationship with God, in the name of the Lord Jesus. And as the message of Christ dwells in the midst of our community, we will encounter peace together instead of devastating brokenness of the world.

Jesus Christ came to bring us peace, to make a way through his sacrifice on the cross and by his grace that we are invited into an abundant relationship with God through Jesus Christ (John 10:10). Through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, we are invited to grow in his grace and in holy living. We live grateful lives because of God's work (ongoing) in our lives. Salvation is fully the work of God, and yet God bids us to respond to his "divine initiative" as we experience conversion.<sup>104</sup> In God's great plan, his creation of a new community is meant to be the primary vehicle through which his relational nature is conveyed to each other, as a family, loving others because Christ first loved us (1 John 4:19). And we are then fitted with compassion and comfort to share with a broken world that sorely needs it (2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

It's so essential that we affirm as well that the work of Jesus on the cross was for much more than just salvation for the individual. Gordon Smith is spot on when he asserts, "God's salvation is always portrayed in corporate terms, never to the exclusion of the individual, but always with the assumption that the individual is an integral member of the community of faith."<sup>105</sup> And so we are all players in God's great drama...the supporting cast gathered together in amazement of God as the primary actor in making

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<sup>104</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 129–31.

<sup>105</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 822–24.

our salvation a reality. As Stanley Grenz puts it, “God’s purpose is the salvation of individuals. But God saves us together, not in isolation. And he saves us for community, not out of it.”<sup>106</sup>

When we recognize that in Christ we are loved in our brokenness, it is in the midst of the people of Jesus we can then be loved in tangible and real ways. Larry Crabb beautifully defines this as a true spiritual community, “a safe place to hit bottom” and that our brokenness even becomes beauty when we receive healing in that safe place.<sup>107</sup> Crabb indicates that as we let our guards down in the safety of fellowship, “the power of connecting (can) do its job....used of God to restore our souls.”<sup>108</sup>

A community that fully (and yet not perfectly) exhibits the love of God in as much fullness as we can muster as sinful, broken people, actually gives us a new identity as people belonging *both* to Christ and each other. In this way, it is easy to see how much we need a true experience of fellowship in the midst of a broken world. This is very akin to the exhortations found in James chapter five to struggling believers. James writes:

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:13-16, NIV)

When that powerful and effective healing happens in the context of true fellowship, it is simply an amazing miracle to witness. This miracle is found on many different levels.

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<sup>106</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 214.

<sup>107</sup> Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community*, Kindle location 2770.

<sup>108</sup> Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community*, Kindle locations 354–56.

Larry Crabb beautifully crafts a vision for fellowship that re-imagines the very way that we see ourselves in our brokenness. He writes:

When we're together in a community of people with a new identity, we move toward them with confidence that they, too, are on a journey led by a sure Guide. Patience is, of course, required: Pornographers buy another magazine, alcoholics take another drink, gossips still gossip and complainers still complain. But we no longer label them as pornographers, alcoholics, gossips, or complainers. Now, we view each other as saints, each with his or her own set of problems, but still saints. Spiritual friends treat each other with dignity and respect. They envision what one day will be, fully in heaven, substantially in this life. The passion to trust that stirs in each saint, kindled by the provision of a New Identity, translates into the passion to envision what the other is becoming as we journey together. There is a difference between seeing someone as your project and having a vision for how the Spirit is shaping their new identity.<sup>109</sup>

We are saints, flawed and full of foibles, but saints nonetheless. And we are on a journey of healing together, where our very identities are being formed by the relational synergy of the community being “in Christ” just as Christ is in each one of us.

Often we are critical of the Church, even though we know it is obviously made up of fallible sinners. But it is still God's creation, and we are powerfully reminded by Albert Wolters, “God does not make junk, and we dishonor the Creator if we take a negative view of the work of his hands when he himself takes such a positive view. In fact, God does not make junk, and he does not junk what he has made.”<sup>110</sup>

Churches are indeed full of folks far less than perfect. Connecting with other broken people in a fellowship is messy, but we know that it is a relational reflection of what we should be about. In and through the mess, God is actually doing his work of sanctification in our lives. We are being both formed by the challenges of living out faith-filled fellowship, even as we are informed by scripture that this is God's intention for us.

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<sup>109</sup> Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community*, Kindle locations 2384–92.

<sup>110</sup> Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 48–49.

Henri Nouwen once comically defined a community as “a place where the person you least want to live with always lives.”<sup>111</sup> It is true, we are called to love and accept each other in a divine community, even (and maybe even especially), when it isn’t easy.

Phillip Yancey declares of this difficult dynamic, “Yes, the church fails in its mission and makes serious blunders precisely because the church comprises human beings who will always fall short of the glory of God. That is the risk God took. Anyone who enters the church expecting perfection does not understand the nature of that risk or the nature of humanity.”<sup>112</sup> Amazing! That is the risk that God took to invite us into each other’s mess, just as he chose to be neck-deep in our mess by the very initiative of the incarnation. And in the midst of that risk, God is shaping and forming each one of us individually. And he will complete the work that he started (Philippians 1:6). But often that work comes with some sparks that fly between Christian siblings. Proverbs 27:17 (NIV) puts it clearly: “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” We have to be ready and smart enough to know that this is just part of our process. Richard Rohr says that church “frustrates us into holiness,” by holding up a shining vision and then inviting us to join the lackluster reality.”<sup>113</sup> Certainly we will never attain the perfect community or most pristine fellowship, but God still calls us together in the midst of the mess. Larry Crabb passionately pleads:

We need a safe place for weary pilgrims. It’s time to put political campaigns and ego-driven agendas and building programs and church activities and inspiring services on the back burner. We need to dive into the unmanageable, messy world of relationships, to admit our failure, to identify our tensions, to explore our shortcomings. We need to become the answer to our Lord’s prayer, that we may become one the way He and the Father are one. It’s time we paid whatever price

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<sup>111</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 661–63.

<sup>112</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 1068–76.

<sup>113</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 733–35.

must be paid to become part of a spiritual community rather than an ecclesiastical organization.<sup>114</sup>

Especially in light of the brokenness of our world, we need to rediscover the power of community together. We have to quit taking the easy way out and running away from each other. It's been said that Winston Churchill shared just such an attitude when he declared, "I relate to the church rather like a flying buttress...I support it from the outside."<sup>115</sup> It's time for a change, a time to take seriously the call of scripture to support and be incorporated into the church from the inside so that we can experience healing together in the midst of a broken world!

### **Conclusion: A High Calling in a Low Bar World**

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:3-6, NIV)

"The best corrective for this kind of thinking (that the church is reduced to nothing more than the collection of individuals who have decided to become Christians, and their common identity is reduced to a common purpose: to get other people to join the club) is for the church to be, unapologetically, the church: to be a community of persons who grow in love for Christ and for one another; who are maturing together in faith, hope, and love; who are engaged together in mission in the world as a community that serves as a sign pointing to Christ's reign, seeking to make a difference for good through word and deed; and who are inviting others who need to be challenged with the call of Christ to join them and participate in this vision and work."

– Gordon Smith, Transforming Conversion

Paul's affection for his dear friends in Philippi (which he literally calls the "affection of Christ Jesus" in Philippians 1:8) is evident in the passage above. And I love the tremendous picture that this passage creates: God is busy working on each one of us as a masterpiece, while at the same time inviting us into a deeper partnership with each

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<sup>114</sup> Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community*, Kindle locations 511–13.

<sup>115</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle Locations 122–26.

other so that we can keep growing in faith. It is in the weaving of the various strands considered here (among countless others found in scripture) that we must affirm that God's creative work is also found in our belonging together in fellowship. Scripture clearly makes the case for community over and over again, as we have seen illustrated.

Perhaps it is one of those core passages for youth ministry all together; a vision that we are partners in this divine participation, this holy sharing of life together. Certainly God is the one doing the work, but we cooperate with him to be who we are called to be. And God, the one whose promises are true, cares for the outcomes in the long haul (the goal, the *telos*). This is true for *both* the Church and each of us as individuals. This returns us to the pressing concern of this entire paper – the durability and longevity of the faith of our young people to own their faith and be anchored in community.

This perspective on sharing the life of Christ together in fellowship is truly a high calling in our world today. As we have seen, the world approaches community with a low bar mentality, shaped by selfishness and brokenness. After this review of the biblical and theologically foundations for community, we cannot help but be inspired and motivated to no longer settle for less than God's best for us in the Church. To fully realize this experience of the relational nature of the Christian faith, then, the high calling of life together in scripture is making the case for community in multiple ways. Community is reflected in the very nature of God in the Trinity and in the model of Jesus as he formed friendships around himself, then setting a pattern for the early Church to be his body. While there are numerous themes of fellowship in scripture, the precedent of faith lived out in family and the powerful motif of *koinonia* are two primary ways that God is



inviting us to go more deeply into relationships with others as we grow deeper in our relationship with him. Discovering some of the practical challenges for relational connections in the Bible, especially in light of our broken world's need for fellowship, reinforces the fact that community isn't just a non-obligatory aspect of our faith. It should be at the core of what it means to be a follower of Christ.

As we apply this foundational perspective to the challenge presented by this thesis, the implications are both broad and deep. So many times in the work of youth ministry, we broadcast the goal of "community" without thinking about the biblical and theological complexities. If we as pastors and church leaders are prepared, however, to not sell short the vision of biblical fellowship, we really can communicate anew a tremendous target for healthy youth ministry. In *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, the authors state:

The Greek word *koinonia* is most often translated as community and used to refer to the communion of saints with each other and with God. If young people experience wholesome friendships in the presence of God and God's people, they can grow in life and faith through these relationships. If these young people are also drawn into relationship with God, the resulting communion bonds them closer together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Other young people can be drawn to God through the witness of God's presence expressed in the love present in their community of faith.<sup>116</sup>

Such a personal ownership of faith in Jesus which is anchored in community (both with peers in youth ministry and with the wider intergenerational church) truly becomes a powerful witness to a world that is waiting and watching to see something authentic in our fellowship. Stanley Grenz maintains, "Your life together with other believers stands as the best confirmation that you know God. The contemporary world challenges our

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<sup>116</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 4544–45.

claim that we have come to know the only true God.”<sup>117</sup> It is in the quality of our relationships with each other that our claim to truly know God and be known by God can help point others to Jesus as well.

If we want to see faith stick for our young believers as they grow and mature, connected with others also growing and maturing, then we must help them experience the love of God in and through community as God intended. It is love that is transformative, not just the getting together itself. Grenz rightly testifies, “At the heart of the enjoyment of community, of course, is the fellowship with God we experience as we respond to his love.”<sup>118</sup>

As we continue to discover the need for fellowship to be experienced, the program outcomes must truly hit the mark of teaching and preparing young believers to be intentional about connecting in community. For most of our adult believers, it is clear that there is often a disconnect between talking about fellowship and experiencing it. Jerry Bridges utters, “It is likely that most Christians neither appreciate the importance of spiritual fellowship nor know how to go about it. They need both instruction and encouragement in the true biblical practice of *koinonia*. One of the marks of a truly good church or Christian group on a campus or a military base should be the warmth of its spiritual fellowship.”<sup>119</sup>

For the argument of this thesis, the same must be said of our youth ministries and Christian education programs. For every age in the Church (and through the encouragement of family at home), the vital objective is to inspire people to personal

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<sup>117</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 39.

<sup>118</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 79.

<sup>119</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle location 945–47.

faith ownership anchored in community. J. I. Packer clearly speaks of this aspiration by stating:

(We cannot) think of our fellowship with other Christians as a spiritual luxury, an optional addition to the exercises of private devotion. We should recognize rather that such fellowship is a spiritual necessity; for God has made us in such a way that our fellowship with himself is fed by our fellowship with fellow-Christians, and requires to be so fed constantly for its own deepening and enrichment.<sup>120</sup>

Certainly living the dream of community to perfection is not within the realm of possibilities. But with intentionality, commitment, and the help of God's Spirit, we have great potential to reflect the promises of God found in fellowship and offer "a whisper of hope."<sup>121</sup> To take this hopeful whisper and begin to shout for community, there is much work to do. It has been said that it is easy to love the concept of love, but hard to love people.<sup>122</sup> In the same way, people have a tendency to love the concept of community, but are unwilling to truly enter into it, unable to persevere in the messiness of relationships long enough to see God show up in their midst. Bonhoeffer provides some valuable cautions to this perspective:

The sooner this moment of disillusionment comes over the individual and the community, the better for both. However, a community that cannot bear and cannot survive such disillusionment, clinging instead to its idealized image, when that should be done away with, loses at the same time the promise of a durable Christian community. Sooner or later it is bound to collapse. Every human idealized image that is brought into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be broken up so that genuine community can survive. Those who love their dream of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, Kindle location 766–73.

<sup>121</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 715–18.

<sup>122</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 91.

<sup>123</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 818–23.

Bonhoeffer goes on to further claim, “Nothing is easier than to stimulate the euphoria of community in a few days of life together; and nothing is more fatal to the healthy, sober, everyday life in community of Christians.”<sup>124</sup> He correctly asserts that we can’t put our faith in the feelings of fellowship, but demands, “It is not the experience of Christian community, but firm and certain faith within Christian community that holds us together.”<sup>125</sup> Again we can find a helpful parallel in the work it takes to make a marriage work, far beyond the warm-fuzzies and passion of the honeymoon. Philip Yancey refers to this relational reality as the nature of the risk that God took to create such amazing potential for both connection (and brokenness) found in the very nature of humanity.<sup>126</sup>

Undoubtedly we have starts and stops as we try to practice life-giving fellowship with others following Jesus together. There are mountaintop experiences (which is a staple in youth ministry), but these are only fading memories if they are not matched with the mundane ins-and-outs of everyday life together. That is where the power of connections really matter and genuine fellowship is proved truly authentic. It is in the midst of the hard stuff – and the boring stuff – and the happy stuff – in the midst of it all that our connections matter most. In our convenience-store world, this is pretty inconvenient. But there are “no instant intimacies in this business (of spiritual community), there are no shortcuts; there is no avoiding confusion and disappointment,” argues Larry Crabb, so that together we “had better be ready for a lifelong process of demanding ventures in following Jesus.”<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 982–87.

<sup>125</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 982–87.

<sup>126</sup> Yancey, *Church: Why Bother?*, Kindle locations 1068–76.

<sup>127</sup> Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community*, Kindle locations 66–69.

That is the target, our goal! The overarching premise of this chapter has been to confirm the integral way in which the case for community is clearly exhibited in scripture. In the words of Stanley Grenz, by using the “theme of community as a guide,” we are led to the powerful “conclusion that we are created for community.”<sup>128</sup> Through the exploration of this biblical and theological material, we have formed a foundation upon which we can now rightly form the conviction of connecting the dots in community for all in our congregations, not just for our students. And while there are greater depths to plumb regarding a fuller understanding of ecclesiology and the very definition of “Church,” the cursory work done in this chapter has furnished us with a full enough understanding of scripture’s high calling to community. (Throughout this paper, I chose to use “church” to describe individual congregations or people’s experience of Christianity in a particular community and “Church” to designate the Body of Christ.) Our next step will be to explore some key research and writings that speak to the need for fellowship in our contemporary setting. This literary review, however, only truly makes sense within the structure set forth by these scriptural imperatives.

One can only imagine the kind of impact in the world the Church would begin to see if our vision of fellowship matched such a high theological conviction. Listen to the finale of the prayer of Jesus found in John 17:

“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one—I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

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<sup>128</sup> Grenz, *Created for Community*, 298.

“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.

“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.” (John 17:20-26, NIV)

Unity! That they all may be one! We can never really rest in making our case for community until we grasp firmly this kind of hope for our fellowship together. Because it is an ongoing part of our process of discipleship and experience of the ongoing love of God, community is central to continuing in faith. It is fitting, however, that we close this chapter with a passage that is a common benediction found in many of our worship services. For our benefit, though, receive this as God’s “good word” to encourage and inspire us to truly know the fullness of the grace of Jesus, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit, which leads us and equips us to have fellowship with each other. “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14, NIV)

## CHAPTER THREE

### LITERARY REVIEW: REFLECTING ON THE REOCCURRING THEMES THAT MAKE A CHORUS

“What do you have against me,  
running off to assert your ‘independence’?”  
GOD’s Decree.  
“I’ve wasted my time trying to train your children.  
They’ve paid no attention to me, ignored my discipline.  
And you’ve gotten rid of your God-messengers,  
treating them like dirt and sweeping them away.  
“What a generation you turned out to be!  
Didn’t I tell you? Didn’t I warn you?  
Have I let you down, Israel?  
Am I nothing but a dead-end street?  
Why do my people say, ‘Good riddance!  
From now on we’re on our own’?  
Young women don’t forget their jewelry, do they?  
Brides don’t show up without their veils, do they?  
But my people forget me.  
Day after day after day  
they never give me a thought.” (Jeremiah 2:30-32, The Message)

“In a culture that elevates personal accomplishment and individual responsibility over mutual support and communal living, growing adolescents find themselves faced with an inescapable conundrum: is it more valuable to learn how to stand tall as a capable individual or to learn how to recognize my need for others and their need for me? In American culture, for some time we have been taught that we are ultimately on our own and that no one will ever care about us or our needs as much as we do. On the other hand, none of us can escape the fact that to live alone is to die, for we are social creatures who must have others to survive.”

– Chap Clark, *Hurt*

“It’s easy for those of us with more years behind us to criticize younger generations rather than to walk lovingly alongside them. I believe this is mostly due to a lack of understanding and perspective— and it’s a loss for both sides.”

– Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart*

Every parent can relate to watching their child begin to exert her independence.

One of the first complete sentences I remember hearing my daughter say was the following: “I do it *myself*!” Barely two years old and she was already pushing away

helping hands. Certainly there are times and places for developmentally appropriate maturity so that each one of us learns to do some things on our own. But we were never meant to do *life* on our own the way we do.

“Doing life on my own.” Perhaps this is an accurate banner that could describe the emerging generation today. So far in this project we have determined that there is a tremendous need for deep and transformational community going unmet in the midst of our churches and that this ache is (at least in part) leading to a generation walking away from active faith. Contrasting this lonely reality with the clear call of scripture brings us to the certain conclusion that something must be done – a response must come from our churches and our families.

God’s impassioned plea found in Jeremiah chapter two illustrates the crux of our crisis: “What do you have against me, running off to assert your ‘independence’?...What a generation you turned out to be!... Why do my people say, ‘Good riddance! From now on we’re on our own’?...But my people forget me. Day after day after day they never give me a thought” (Jeremiah 2:30-32, The Message). In our honest assessment of the independence of this generation, however, we must assert that their posture of fierce independence is really born out of an “inescapable conundrum.”<sup>1</sup> Our young people have been repeatedly hurt and let down by those called to care for them in such a way that makes them feel as if their only choice is to be “on their own.” I believe that Chuck Bomar is spot on in pointing out that it is much easier to simply be critical of this younger generation rather than doing the hard work of lovingly walking alongside them and

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<sup>1</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 4083–4087.



gaining the “understanding and perspective” needed to provide any kind of hope and support.<sup>2</sup>

This literary review chapter will seek to present a context for gaining both understanding of this contemporary challenge and perspective on exactly what some key researchers and church workers are proposing as good ways to respond to these dynamics. By considering an overview of the most relevant and timely research related to this topic, we will discover a common ground chorus of reoccurring themes that must be addressed by the proposals of this paper.

Beyond simply covering the epidemic of so many young people losing their faith, this chapter will also highlight the hope that can be found in viable models of ministry that create an environment for faith nurture in spite of these concerns. And while this chorus may not always be singing a consensus “melody” in their proposals for a few simple solution steps, there exists a tremendous amount of harmony between these various authors. To best hear from their individual perspectives, these literary works have been organized within a framework of themes introduced in chapter one to describe the key issues that are at stake for the contemporary Church. Key works for each category will be listed and explored below.

### **The Reoccurring Themes**

In order to better comprehend *the ache of the loss of community for this generation*, two key works that raise critical questions for the whole Church to respond to will be taken into account. *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* by Chap Clark does an excellent job of expanding upon the sense of abandonment which is so

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<sup>2</sup> Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 28–31.

acute for these students, prescribing some helpful steps to turn the tide of loneliness for young people. In Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton's book *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, crucial topics relating to the religious perspectives of adolescents are expanded upon, bringing both optimistic and sobering news to the state of the spirituality of this generation.

Shifting the discussion specifically to *the matter of churches who find themselves "stuck"* in coping with the phenomenon of lost faith, two more books will be explored. David Kinnaman's research work *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* provides a helpful way to imagine the various categories of those who have grown up in the church but no longer find organized faith a viable option for their spiritual journeys. The findings of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* by John Roberto, Wesley Black and Roland Martinson, offer practical, congregationally-based solutions to counteract unhealthy patterns that have led churches to disengage from the task of nurturing their youth.

In recognizing *the underutilized power of family inspired faith*, two excellent books – which really are representative of vital, full-fledged ministry movements of the last few years – will be investigated. *Sticky Faith*, written by Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, translates several years of longitudinal research into concrete applications for families and churches seeking to support faith in families. In a similar way, *Think Orange*, by Reggie Joiner, magnifies the incredible potential of the intentional partnership between family and faith community to make a greater impact on the spiritual lives of youth.

Finally, special attention will be given to two exceptional books that concentrate on taking seriously *the shortcomings of many of our present models of addressing ministry to youth* and prescribing new solutions to better help youth ministries focus on producing a faith that lasts. *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, by Mark DeVries offers a dynamic, systems-based approach to understanding the ways in which a youth ministry influences faith longevity in healthy ways. Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith, produced *The Slow Fade*, which rings a challenging wake-up call for youth ministries which are too fixated on an artificial spiritual formation finish line at high school graduation.

This review only begins to reveal the common patterns of the numerous perspectives that exist. However, both the frequency with which several of these works are lifted up by youth ministry leaders as new models of crafting ministry and the ways in which these works overlap truly make a chorus of reoccurring themes to be considered. It is essential to be well-read and equipped to best advise the church to address the concerns raised by this paper. True wisdom can be found by engaging the conversations of key authors highlighted in this chapter. Scripture advises, “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20, NIV). This sentiment is again echoed: “Whoever heeds life-giving correction will be at home among the wise. Those who disregard discipline despise themselves, but the one who heeds correction gains understanding” (Proverbs 15:31, 32 NIV). I believe that it is only through a right understanding of the dynamics being studied by these passionate practitioners of ministry that will we properly be prepared to formulate a vision for change in the midst of our own context. It is the purpose of this chapter to consider these authors as companions and

“hear” the unique themes and motifs that they bring to the chorus call to better engage our ministry to the emerging generation. By intensely engaging this material, we can discover the great potential that can be found in strengthening our ministry to our students, families, and churches.

**THEME: Responding to the Loss of Community**

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.” (Matthew 9:35-37, NIV)

“Adolescents have suffered the loss of the safe relationships and intimate settings that served as the primary nurturing community for those traveling the path from child to adult. The most obvious example of this is in the family...Add to this trend the rarity of extended family available to the vast majority of adolescents, the deemphasizing of the importance of marriage, and the lack of healthy relationships with adults as friends and mentors, and it is easy to see why today’s adolescent faces an internal crisis of unprecedented scope.”

– Chap Clark, *Hurt*

These sources respond to the critical loss of community among our young. The validity of this need within the culture of adolescence today has been adequately validated in this paper. Quite honestly, it can quickly become overwhelming to be so immersed in the personal stories and the statistical analysis of youth issues today. But, there is hope to be found in the midst of the heartache. Both *Hurt* and *Soul Searching* have found wide acceptance for their being sound in research and their optimistic response to the loss of community experienced today by many in the emerging generation.

We can quickly list the daunting challenges that our young people face – fractured families, peer pressure, fear of school violence, bullying, and the like. Living up to the

expectations and pressure from others is also high on that list.<sup>3</sup> Achievement has even been elevated to the level of addiction by some, further making the point that our kids are more pressed and stressed than ever before.<sup>4</sup>

Both of these works provide the perspective of personal stories mixed in with excellent research to speak to the issues of adolescent development and spirituality today. Intentionally at the heart of each of these works is a desire to put names and faces to the statistics and research. If any kind of impact is going to happen, it will begin one kid at a time.<sup>5</sup> Using *Hurt* as a summary of the trials of “experiencing adolescence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” Clark’s clear call to action will help inspire us to be impact makers. Within *Soul Searching*, Smith and Denton provide both the “good news and not so good news” of teenage spirituality in America and will help us broaden our understanding of what is at stake for our communities of faith. Throughout these studies, these researchers not only recognize some of the crucial dynamics, but also the reality that helpful – and perhaps even hopeful – response can be found as we unite together in our churches and communities.

#### **Responding to the Loss of Community by Reflecting on *Hurt* - Experiencing Adolescence in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

“The only way we can stem the tide of the consequences of abandonment is to encourage a wide variety of adults to take part in the lives of the young. Nothing else will make a difference—not more baseball fields, more programs and events, or more job opportunities. Because the root of the issues related to contemporary adolescence has to do with leaving this age group to flounder on its own, the answer is relationships with adults who sincerely care. That is the most fundamental need of this abandoned generation.”

– Chap Clark, *Hurt*

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<sup>3</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 102.

<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods* (New York: Penguin Group, 2009), 73–74.

<sup>5</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4230–32.

There are perhaps only a handful of books that truly re-shape how one views ministry and for me, *Hurt* (in its original edition) was just such a book. Chap Clark's efforts to help youth workers, parents, pastors, and others see the needs of an abandoned generation in new ways proved very fruitful. Of the many things that I appreciate about Hurt is Clark's style of relating personal stories which reminds us that each young person's individual story matters. In light of the staggering statistics that are presented, these true-life illustrations remind us that kids are not just statistics. He points out that the extension of adolescence and other cultural dynamics which deeply affect teens in our society today, leave them feeling "abandoned." This is a core motif of the book, and while I don't recall using that term much before reading *Hurt*, I have used it many times since. It seems that people intuitively know that being a teenager in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is very different than in previous generations, and this book shows them why this is the case.

This abandoned generation's need for relational safety is tremendous. This comes as a direct challenge to the Church (as well to other institutions) to find other ways for adults to engage the lives of young people by becoming a needed "chorus" of support and encouragement.<sup>6</sup> Clark is critical of the shortcomings of such institutions in the past and illustrates a need for a change. Found within *Hurt* are helpful reflections that lead to a deeper understanding of the cumulative nature of the challenges facing the younger generation. Written in such a way that it speaks to parents, youth leaders, and even the students themselves, this book shows a path to anyone who want to get serious about being part of the solution of bringing greater encouragement to these struggling teens.

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<sup>6</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4452–56.

There is much in *Hurt* that offers churches and parents guidance in addressing the ache of this generation. First, the challenges of abandonment and loneliness are clarified and applied to every aspect of our interaction with young people with whom we have influence. Next, we are directed toward a response that must be a widely based effort to counteract the loss of community for our young people by activating the Church itself as community.

### **The Main Motif: Clarifying the Challenge of Abandonment**

Clark declares that the variety of dynamics of adolescence are staggering in scope; in fact, he states growing up as a kid today is “fundamentally different” than thirty years ago.<sup>7</sup> These differences are more than just intimidating for the youth themselves. Sadly those charged with the responsibility of supporting our youth often are so overwhelmed by their own struggles that they leave the kids to fend for themselves. Clark says that this departure of significant adult supporters has created a “deepening hole of systemic rejection” that it is “the root of the fragmentation and calloused distancing that are the hallmarks of the adolescent culture.”<sup>8</sup> Much heartbreak is found in the ways that this reality rings true to us who work with adolescents in the Church! And when I have brought this dynamic up to parents and other adults, we see the evidence in our own stories and grieve this reality.

Reflecting back upon a main pattern that we have seen appear time and again in our discovery, loneliness is a “central experience” of teenagers today, although it is sometimes rare for them to find a setting that is safe enough for them to confess it.<sup>9</sup> Clark

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<sup>7</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 431–32.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 624–27.

<sup>9</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1012.

illustrates how pervasive this underlying wound is for many adolescents who see themselves as being on their own. As adults, we have years of experience and (hopefully) maturity to draw on in coping with our loneliness, but this isn't true for our youth, who are often without these kinds of resources.

Meanwhile, as Clark points out, young people are trying to discover who they are becoming in the midst of perceived and true abandonment, wrestling mostly on their own with the vital tasks of identity, autonomy, and belonging.<sup>10</sup> Clark quotes others, such as David Elkind, who also identify this stark reality, noting how many young people “struggle to find an identity without the benefit of a supportive adult envelope.”<sup>11</sup> One could surely apply the phrase “more isolated and more unsupervised than any other generation” (Patricia Hersch) to circumstances of our day.<sup>12</sup> But this fact does not have to be the end of the story.

There is great encouragement in Clark's assertion that students themselves don't want the distance they experience with the adults in their lives. Clark reflects, “Contrary to what most adults may think, (students) want significant relationships with adults who care about them.”<sup>13</sup> Certainly the changing landscape of hurt that comes from rampant abandonment is a formidable adversary, but we must not forget our young people do have allies. It is through a wide community based response, especially from the Church, that we can help meet this challenge.

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<sup>10</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 3736–37.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 819–23.

<sup>12</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 870–72.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1092–94.



### **The Response: Committing to “Be There” for Youth**

It is vital that we don’t just stop and become overwhelmed with the problems that are identified in *Hurt*. Clark eventually does moves on to the hope of a positive response for all those who want better for our youth. Our response lies primarily in addressing their need for relational connections across the generations from the wider community. Active and available adults within their churches, schools, etc. can help change the dynamics and shift this generation’s sense of being on their own. To truly compensate from a lack of care that they have experienced, those who are willing to step into the gap to provide support must know that they only really get one chance at regaining the trust of kids who have felt betrayed.

Clark outlines two central elements to making the most of a response to be there for our youth. He writes, “The most vital things those (people) close to individual mid-adolescents can do are to, first, understand their world, and second, provide boundaries for them in a way that will keep them from making seriously negative choices even as they attempt to navigate this difficult developmental phase of life.”<sup>14</sup> He also brings these strategies specifically to parents, so it is obvious that these are his prescribed keys to our response.<sup>15</sup>

To truly “be there” for these adolescents, we must move to action beyond our awareness of the need. After we understand their world, part of our providing boundaries is to build mutual relationships of friendship with students. And we must share the firm conviction that students do desire to know the friendship of elders as allies in their lives. Clark drives this point home effectively as he discerns, “These fragile young people are

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<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1474–75.

<sup>15</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 2354–57.

not pretending to be callous; rather, they are wearing their toughness like a shield to protect them from further disappointment. This, however, is an exhausting and never-ending game.”<sup>16</sup> As adults of influence, we must not be intimidated by the complexity of these realities. We must press on toward friendship in spite of the barriers. Clark is correct in demonstrating that this difficult task takes “more than (just) the presence of a social network to create the kind of support a developing adolescent requires to meet her innate need for unconditional inclusion and authentic belonging to a group.”<sup>17</sup> That social network of caring adults must be confidently engaged to get their hands dirty in support of our youth.

Clark then provides a very simple description for an adult who wants to practically care for youth, one kid at a time. It is vital that we invest in their lives relationally without a “hidden or self-centered agenda,” rather than just being there as support.<sup>18</sup> Most likely there will be times when very practical assistance (with career coaching, college searching, and spiritual guidance) will come into play, but it must be emphasized that these young people are not projects to be fixed! They are just crying out for someone who cares, for a place to fit into the adult world beyond their immediate family.<sup>19</sup> To summarize Clark’s description of an adult who is needed, he proposes: “The only qualification an adult needs is the willingness and fortitude to authentically care.... Youth need a stable and secure loving presence. Youth need to experience authentic, intimate relationships with adults.”<sup>20</sup> Clark’s call to passionately solicit every

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<sup>16</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1414–17.

<sup>17</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4102–04.

<sup>18</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 831–32.

<sup>19</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4104–07.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4245–50.

adult who cares seems to reflect the passion of Paul in the book of Philippians about the “attitude of Christ” (Philippians 2:1-5). The next generation is aching for a cure to their loneliness. In a similar vein, author Mark DeVries also decries, “Emotionally available neighbors, grandparents, teachers or coaches are quickly moving to the endangered species list, as the pace of life topples over itself and the number of children who need care vastly outpaces the number of adults who choose to be available to them.”<sup>21</sup> But thankfully in *Hurt*, Clark has given us a pattern as adults who care to stand and count ourselves as part of the hopeful solution.

As we grow in a greater understanding of the complexities of this emerging generation’s era, expand our comprehension of the dynamics of abandonment, and then commit to a response to relationally invest and be there for them, things can shift for the better. Clark’s imperative is clear: we must become “more astute students of the kids we are mandated by society to nurture.”<sup>22</sup> We can be changed, even moved to action by the stories of hurt in the lives of our youth. In fact, our being changed is truly a pre-requisite for us if we want to help bring change for our young.<sup>23</sup> The encouraging tone of Clark’s solution is echoed in the book *Consuming Youth*. In the research of these authors, youth reported that those adults who had made a big impact in their lives often did it through the simple act of investing in short conversations of usually twenty minutes or less!<sup>24</sup> In their words, “This ought to inspire and provide hope for any adult that connecting with

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<sup>21</sup> Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 38.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 734–37.

<sup>23</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 210–12.

<sup>24</sup> John Berard, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett, *Consuming Youth: Navigating Youth from Being Consumers to Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 1936–43.

youth is not always a daunting and consuming endeavor but rather is often within reach.”<sup>25</sup>

Chap Clark is a leading voice of a growing chorus of experts who are communicating that change for this generation is possible and within reach. But it will take a community response to help solve a community problem. Listen to Clark’s conclusion: “One fan, even a great one, is not enough. Every adult must attempt to add to the cumulative message of protection, nurture, warmth, and affection. It takes several consistently supportive and encouraging messages to counteract the effects of systemic abandonment. By far the best way to help our young is by being a chorus of support and a choir of commitment.”<sup>26</sup> To address the challenge of lost community in their lives, it’s time for us to sing along!

**Responding to the Loss of Community by Reflecting on *Soul Searching* - Good News and “Not So Good” News of Teenage Spirituality in America**

“In U.S. culture, the very ideas of ‘teenagers’ and ‘rebellion’ are virtually synonymous...But that impression is fundamentally wrong. What we learned by interviewing hundreds of different kinds of teenagers all around the country is that the vast majority of American teenagers are exceedingly conventional in their religious identity and practices...The popular images of storm and stress, generation gap, and teen rebellion may describe the religious orientations and experiences of most teenagers of prior generations, but they do not accurately portray the religious realities of most teenagers in the United States today.

– Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching*

After hearing much of the research by Smith and Denton in *Soul Searching* over the years, I was glad to finally dig into their book and see the amazing implications of their findings first hand. Truly, this work is essential reading for anyone working in the Church because the authors have more to say about the wider Church than just adolescent

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<sup>25</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle location 1943.

<sup>26</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 734–37.

spirituality. While the breadth of the findings is exhaustive (even exhausting), the summary of their findings is truly compelling.<sup>27</sup>

Many key insights from this study should be highlighted. Certainly the study of youth in America demonstrates developing trends shared by the wider Church and society as well. In the midst of the complexity and even contradictions seen in their findings, they give a very thorough picture. Overall, however, one finds a mixed bag of discoveries in *Soul Searching* – good news and not-so-good news about teenage spirituality in America today.

To best decipher the variety of findings evident in *Soul Searching*, three aspects of the research found in this book will be explored. First, the authors have good news; young people are open to things of faith and have generally a positive impression of religion. Second, there is also some bad news to be considered: the faith that most of our teens exhibit doesn't look like orthodox Christianity in many ways. Finally, the authors offer some important words of hope to help us respond to the great opportunities that we have to influence their faith.

### **The Main Motif: Youth are Open to Faith but Who has “Faith” in their Faith?**

Over the past several years, many stereotypes have arisen about teenage spirituality which normally paint a seriously bleak picture of a disillusioned generation, specializing in spiritual dabbling and experimenting. The work of Smith and Denton

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<sup>27</sup>The findings from research conducted by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR; see [www.youthandreligion.org](http://www.youthandreligion.org)). From July 2002 to March 2003, the NSYR conducted a national, random digit-dial telephone survey of U.S. households containing at least one teenager age 13–17, surveying one household parent for about 30 minutes and one randomly selected household teen for about 50 minutes. Then, in the spring and summer of 2003, 17 trained project researchers conducted 267 in-depth, face-to-face interviews with a subsample of telephone survey respondents in 45 states. Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle location 138–44.

actually gives us a great deal of good news that communicates quite the opposite! The young people in their project describe liking their churches and youth groups. Generally positive about things of faith, most students show that their faith actually mirrors their parents' to a great extent.<sup>28</sup> Overall, adolescents summed up their viewpoints in the following way: "Religion as a Very Nice Thing."<sup>29</sup> But is their faith making any kind of tangible and practical impact on their real life?

But there is a flip side to faith only being a "Very Nice Thing." In the specifics of their faith, American teens are "all over the map."<sup>30</sup> So while they may not be "lost" in a whole scale way – bailing on their faith in frustration – the research indicates that having a positive association with religion does not necessarily translate into any kind of change or transformation for these young people. Still, we recognize from the research that many are lacking road maps and guidance to help them even be "found" in their faith. This leads us to some "bad news" in two different ways. First, many teens who define themselves as "Christian" embrace a non-orthodox and crippled view of Christianity. Second, even as young people describe optimistic view of issues of faith, they are woefully inarticulate in communicating the faith that they profess.

In reflecting on the teens' view of spiritual things, Smith and Denton coined an appropriate term for the prevalent perspective that the youth interviewed communicated: "Moralistic Therapeutic Deism."<sup>31</sup> Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD) can best be summarized by these five tenets:

1. A God exists who created and orders the world and watches over human life on earth.

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<sup>28</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 742–45.

<sup>29</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 2574–75.

<sup>30</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 618–19.

<sup>31</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3526.

2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.<sup>32</sup>

The authors concede that no student would be able to use the phrase “MTD.” However, the consistency of these answers to life's big questions point to their conclusion.<sup>33</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, who worked on the NSYR (National Study of Youth and Religion) team, reflects on the problem by asserting, “Churches have perfected a dicey codependence between consumer-driven therapeutic individualism and religious pragmatism.”<sup>34</sup> Dean properly diagnoses this wider Church problem as “theological malpractice,” sadly decrying “perhaps most young people practice Moralistic Therapeutic Deism not because they reject Christianity, but because this is the only ‘Christianity’ they know.”<sup>35</sup>

This worldview is “moralistic” because students associate faith issues to be about what is “right” and “wrong.” The goal is all about keeping the rules, helping you feel good about your actions and yourself.<sup>36</sup> MTD is “therapeutic” because life is primarily about being happy! The authors assert that the “dominant religion among U.S. teenagers is centrally about feeling good, happy, secure, at peace.”<sup>37</sup> From this angle, relating to God is definitely a self-centered endeavor where they see God “as something like a cosmic therapist or counselor.”<sup>38</sup> Ironically, a contemporary pop song by Pharrell

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<sup>32</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 3527–32.

<sup>33</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3535.

<sup>34</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle locations 128–30.

<sup>35</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 252–54.

<sup>36</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3553.

<sup>37</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3558.

<sup>38</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3163.

Williams proclaims, “Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth.”<sup>39</sup> Last, the prevailing religious attitude of the day is “deistic” because people generally believe in a type of God who is creator, but not necessarily active in the day to day activities of humanity.<sup>40</sup> With God at such a safe distance, many just imagine that God is watching us from above. Still primarily in control of our own lives, we call on our combo “Divine Butler, Cosmic Therapist” as needed, but otherwise get along just fine on our own (thank you very much).<sup>41</sup>

In addressing the “bad news” of such a theology, we must recognize the implications of such a non-biblical understanding of God. Students, for the most part, are illiterate when it comes to the Bible and its connection to our lives.<sup>42</sup> Sadly, the research of *Soul Searching* points to the fact that MTD isn’t just an issue with our teenagers; it would appear that it is “a widespread, popular faith among very many U.S. adults” that filters down to our young.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to this warped view of Christianity, youth surveyed also demonstrated the inability to clearly articulate their faith. Even students describing themselves as serious about faith were often unable to talk about *why* they were serious and even *what* the core of their faith was all about. They were found by the authors to be “remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion.”<sup>44</sup> Befuddled would not seem a good setup for staying strong in one’s faith in the face of so many obstacles in life. Especially if the downside of MTD leaves the perception of God as fickle and absent, no wonder some of

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<sup>39</sup> Pharrell Williams, “Happy.” *Despicable Me 2* Soundtrack album, Columbia Records, CD, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3574.

<sup>41</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3589.

<sup>42</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 913.

<sup>43</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 3612.

<sup>44</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 640–41.



our most religiously faithful kids feel like they are on their own. Their theology reinforces their loneliness.

The researchers of *Soul Searching* report that often “our interview was the first time that any adult had ever asked them what they believed and how it mattered.”<sup>45</sup> It is no small wonder then that our young people are confused. Smith and Denton speak to this “bad news” by declaring, “It is not so much that U.S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself or, more significantly, Christianity is actively being colonized and displaced by a quite different religious faith.”<sup>46</sup> There is much at stake for the life of the Church, as well as the faith journeys of individuals. A response is needed. Being aware of such mindsets, we can instead shape the faith of youth into a more authentic picture of biblical Christianity.

### **The Response: Seizing the Great Opportunities to Be an Influence**

With so much on the line for the faith of our youth and the life of the Church, we must measure a response to the challenges raised by these authors – and truly see them as opportunities for a more solid faith for our students. Smith and Denton recognize the multiple obstacles that stand in the way of the faith development of our students. The busyness and pace of life, lack of consistent adults present and accounted for in their lives, and a general absence of a holistic picture of Christianity are just some of the significant factors they consider. Truly, our kids often have very little space – let alone maturity – to invest in growing in their faith while they operate in an “environment that is highly competitive for time, attention, and energy.”<sup>47</sup> At the same time, lacking adult

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<sup>45</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 2788–89.

<sup>46</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 3707–15.

<sup>47</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 643–44.

support to provide encouragement, the prevailing messages about their faith are “powerful (and) contradictory, (messages that) implore them to act fully responsibly, be self-directed, and make very good choices as independent decision makers” – again they feel on their own.<sup>48</sup> Yet there are reasons to have hope! Two vital resources can better support the journeys of these young souls in our churches and communities. There are great opportunities present as we affirm and strategize around families and intergenerational connections. Both of these elements matter in making a difference for our youth.

The first key resource is found in our families. When it comes to declaring that “family matters,” we return to an important theme – family faith is passed on (or not) from one generation to another. Smith and Denton write, “Parents are normally very important in shaping the religious and spiritual lives of their teenage children, even though they may not realize it.”<sup>49</sup> Now is the time to point out this fact and gently nudge our parents to make the most of this opportunity. In fact, the authors go as far as to challenge the parents about their own faith, noting that it will drastically influence the faith of their children. Bluntly stated, “We’ll get what we are.”<sup>50</sup> While this might be received by some parents as a note of discouragement, quite the opposite should be intended. We are all still growing in our faith, so grow with your children. Family faith matters!

Intergenerational connections, our second resource, also matter, as emphasized in this research. We must break down the inaccurate stereotypes about teenagers and

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<sup>48</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 4016–18.

<sup>49</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 1101–02.

<sup>50</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 1127.

respond to their true needs. They want to connect in community across the generations! The authors point out that while “the majority of teens who do not have such enjoyable and encouraging adult ties in their congregations...wish they did.”<sup>51</sup> While this might seem counterintuitive for adults who incorrectly diagnose the posture of youth as apathy or disinterest, we can wisely create environments to foster these connections. As far as Smith and Denton are concerned, “it is difficult to overestimate the importance for youth of the transgenerational and age-variable character” of American religious organizations.<sup>52</sup> This initiative is a key place of investment for our churches. Adults influence the lives of our teens – period; we are simply challenged to consider the kind of influence, whether encouraging and positive or discouraging and negative.<sup>53</sup>

In *Soul Searching*, we are confronted with both the amazing opportunities for strategic responses as well as some of our shortcomings in fostering faith. The authors critique that while we as churches have not been “wildly successful” in supporting strong faith for our youth, we still have tremendous influence to exercise.<sup>54</sup> The invitation to respond is right before us; will we respond? Smith and Denton leave us with this challenge:

It appears to us, in other words, that parents, pastors, ministers, religious educators, and congregational leaders concerned with youth largely need simply to better engage and challenge the youth already at their disposal, to work better to help make faith a more active and important part of their lives. The problem is not that youth won’t come to church (most will), or that they hate church (few do), or that they don’t want to listen to religious ministers or mature mentoring adults (they will and do). But this does not mean that youth are currently being well engaged by their religious congregations. They generally are not.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 1183–86.

<sup>52</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 5358–59.

<sup>53</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 658–59.

<sup>54</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 652–54.

<sup>55</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 5799–5804.

In best utilizing the excellent research and finding ways to appropriately share with the wider Church both the good news and “not-so-good-news,” perhaps we can be inspired to better engage this generation as they continue their spiritual searching. In this way, we echo the goal behind the study of Smith and Denton, that “we will help to foster discussions in families, religious congregations, community organizations, and beyond, not only about the general state of religion in the United States, but also about cultural and institutional practices that may better serve and help to care for America’s teens.”<sup>56</sup> It is indeed vital that we have these conversations and learn from the patterns observed in the lost sense of community (as seen in *Hurt*), as well as the tremendous opportunities to help our students go beyond just “feeling good” about God and truly own a deep faith (as seen in *Soul Searching*.)

**THEME: Responding to Stuck Churches**

How good and pleasant it is  
when God’s people live together in unity!  
It is like precious oil poured on the head,  
running down on the beard,  
running down on Aaron’s beard,  
down on the collar of his robe.  
It is as if the dew of Hermon  
were falling on Mount Zion.  
For there the LORD bestows his blessing,  
even life forevermore. (Psalm 133, NIV)

“When it comes to faith transmission, the first call of the church is surely to its children... This has always been one of the most dynamic challenges and concerns of the church: how to sustain the faith from one generation to the next. Rare is the parent for whom this is not a major burden, with the desire to see a child come to an adult faith in Christ. One thing is clear: there are no guarantees. There is no method for assuring that our children come to an active faith in Christ.”

– Gordon Smith, *Transforming Conversion*

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<sup>56</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 95–97.

While many churches and pastors would fully agree with Gordon Smith's assertion above that the "first call of the church is to its children," there is growing evidence that shows that many – if not most – congregations have little capacity to articulate a strategy for helping the next generation grow up strong in their faith. Certainly many would assert that it is "good and pleasant" for God's people to come together in unity, but is there a clear vision for the goal of our coming together? As it relates to the passing on of our faith, there is bound to be disappointment if our joy lasts only a moment and not for our children.

Many parents who have raised their children past adolescence would concur with Smith when he confesses that there are also no guarantees when it comes to our own children's acceptance of Christ. Even with a great deal of dedication by parents and parish, sometimes children of the congregation go their own way....and sometimes they do not appear to come back to faithfully walking with Jesus. So while this may be the reality for some, this should not give the Church the excuse of not taking seriously the community practices and responsibilities that they have for their kids. Again, Kara Powell (and her co-authors of *Sticky Faith*) bemoan, "Given the seeming importance of retaining youth for most religious groups in the United States, it is striking how haphazardly most congregations go about it."<sup>57</sup> When there is not a plan, not only is it easy to get lost....it is easier still to get stuck. And that's exactly where many of our churches find themselves today as they imagine trying to nurture faith in the next generation.

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<sup>57</sup> Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 252–53.

For those working in ministry with the emerging generation, two excellent books based on research have much to offer the Church by way of both a pointed critique of the “stuckness” of the Church, but also hope for ways to get un-stuck. *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, written by David Kinnaman from the Barna Group, addresses many of the contributing factors that young people associate with their disillusionment of contemporary Christianity. Kinnaman’s study of these twentysomething “mosaics,” (often called “millennials”), provides much fodder for critical conversations for our church leaders.<sup>58</sup>

An additional resource, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* brought forth by the team of John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, looks directly at the power of the environment of individual congregations to produce young people with exemplary faith. Their findings are practical and use an asset model to give concrete language to churches wishing to evaluate and improve their cultural atmosphere. Certainly, evaluation is never really easy – especially when we ask our congregations to take a hard look in the mirror and recognize some flaws. However, there is much hope as we diagnose some of the challenges illuminated by these excellent resources. Strategies for getting out of some of the ruts of “stuckness” can prove transformational to our ministries – and ultimately will better support the faith journeys of the children of our churches.

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<sup>58</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 201.

**Responding to Stuck Churches by Reflecting on *You Lost Me* - Framing the Fallout of Churchgoing Young People**

“Like a Geiger counter under a mushroom cloud, the next generation is reacting to the radioactive intensity of social, technological, and religious changes. And for the most part, we are sending them into the world unprepared to withstand the fallout.”

– David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*

Another truly impactful book that speaks directly to the concern about stuck churches is *You Lost Me*, by David Kinnaman. To best summarize what is offered by Kinnaman’s good work, his research effectively frames the missing demographic of young twenty-somethings from our churches. In creating solid categories for talking about what kind of “lost-ness” they are experiencing after graduating from our youth groups, the reasons behind their sense of confusion are explored. In addition to this, very practical responses to the contemporary issues point to hope and can help initiate rich conversations reaching out to this generation so that we don’t lose them.

In many ways, it is not surprising to hear about the significant disillusionments this generation has with faith today. The reason that they are saying “you lost me” really is an honest confession that congregations are very much disengaged from some of the many important areas of dialogue for young people today. This generation is wanting to wrestle deeply with significant issues (sexuality, authority, doubt, science and faith, etc.), but the findings of this survey demonstrate that unfortunately most of our graduates have little access to a network of adult support with whom to process such pressing concerns. So if they are feeling lost and the Church isn’t helping them, why should we expect anything different?

This book reminds us that every individual is a person with a unique story and the key to helping them become “found” is to listen to their stories with grace.<sup>59</sup> To best reflect on the research of *You Lost Me*, this brief synopsis covers the different types of “lost-ness” that Kinnaman reports, as well as the explanations behind the spiritual floating these former church kids have experienced. Kinnaman powerfully points out, “Many of the struggles experienced by Mosaic dropouts are not new— they have, in fact, been repeated through centuries of spiritual life within Christianity— yet they are exacerbated by the new realities (making them) different from previous generations.”<sup>60</sup> Now is the time to match these challenges with a commitment for better engagement of our young people.

### **The Main Motif: There are Different Types of “Lost-ness”**

Kinnaman effectively describes different types of audiences who have floated from active participation in the life of the Church. In some ways, Kinnaman isn’t describing them as “lost” spiritually as much as communicating that their attitude toward the Church is one that concedes a deep disconnect between the way that faith is experienced in many churches and how young people are trying to authentically discover their own faith. To clarify different types of lost-ness, Kinnaman reinforces some key findings that have already been alluded to in this paper. For many between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine, Kinnaman plainly declares this season of life the “black hole of church attendance, (where) this age segment is ‘missing in action’ from most congregations.”<sup>61</sup> For those who grew up in the church as children, there is a sharp

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<sup>59</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1431–32.

<sup>60</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 900–02.

<sup>61</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 249–51.



decline in activity during the early adult years, where the research done by Kinnaman demonstrates a 43 percent drop-off rate.<sup>62</sup> The author declares the majority of these “dropouts” can be described by three categories: “prodigals, nomads, and exiles.”<sup>63</sup>

Kinnaman uses the term “prodigal” to designate those people who have disengaged from faith and say they are no longer Christian.<sup>64</sup> Often there is a correspondent sense of wounding that is associated with their experience with church and specific believers. In simplest terms, they have “moved on from Christianity,” often because this faith perspective no longer “makes sense” to them.<sup>65</sup> From the surveys evaluated by Kinnaman’s work, they estimate that a “young Christian has about 1:9 odds of losing his or her faith.”<sup>66</sup>

The author uses the word “nomad” to describe those who have wandered from their Christian faith, but do not necessarily wholly reject it.<sup>67</sup> His research team estimates that approximately 40% of young people who grew up in Christian churches will be a nomad for at least a season.<sup>68</sup> For the most part, they would still describe themselves as being a Christian; it is just that their level of participation – and even their sense of the necessity of participation in a faith community – has waned. Often they have not intentionally made a break from their faith, they just strayed away over time.<sup>69</sup> This group has really wandered out of their church experience due to a growing sense of apathy or laziness – or because they haven’t discovered the value of continuing in their faith. A

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<sup>62</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 249–51.

<sup>63</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 374–76.

<sup>64</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1010–1013.

<sup>65</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1069–72.

<sup>66</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1102.

<sup>67</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 949–50.

<sup>68</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 949–50.

<sup>69</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 954–56.

good number of those young Christians interviewed (about one-quarter) who could be termed a nomad would be open to returning to church at a later time in life, but there was no sense of urgency to make that move.<sup>70</sup> Rarely have they expressed hostility to the faith of their youth; they just describe it as optional. From the research, a former church-going young person is about four times more likely to become a nomad than a prodigal.<sup>71</sup>

In assigning the label “exile” to the third group, Kinnaman is defining them as “those who grew up in the church and are now physically or emotionally disconnected in some way, but who also remain energized to pursue God-honoring lives.”<sup>72</sup> There is definitely a sense of loss of church experience – and still a sense of lost-ness, but for the most part, they haven’t walked away from their relationship with God. Disillusioned with traditional church settings, they often have a bad taste in their mouth about a faith defined by “slick or shallow expressions of religion.”<sup>73</sup> For exiles, God is still alive and well in the world, just mostly experienced outside of the organized church. About 10 percent of young believers would fit into this category.<sup>74</sup> Many of these exiles are doing their best to create new expressions of faithful living, and they are in many ways the most communal of these three designations.<sup>75</sup>

Having been in youth ministry for over twenty years, I have struggled to find helpful descriptions to best portray the myriad challenges facing our graduates. But I have found such power in Kinnaman’s characterization of the uniqueness of “exiles,” “nomads,” and “prodigals.” These three different kinds of experiences of faith (or lack of

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<sup>70</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 985.

<sup>71</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1095.

<sup>72</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1170.

<sup>73</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1226.

<sup>74</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1244.

<sup>75</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1230.

faith) are profoundly influenced by the faith community (both with immediate family and church family). There is a great deal of emotional punch with terms like “exile” and “prodigal,” but it is appropriate to use such volatile language to wake up church leadership to the ways we’ve mishandled our approach to this emerging generation.

While there are a variety of contrasts between the different types of dropouts, You Lost Me illustrates a strikingly consistent list of grievances that young Christians declare when it comes to their experience of their faith in the Church today. Kinnaman and his team discovered, however, there existed a “wide range of perspectives, frustrations, and disillusionments that compel twentysomethings to disconnect. No single reason pushes them to drop out.”<sup>76</sup>

Pastors and church leaders need to spend time evaluating how to best consider the shortcomings of our congregations to aid our young people in the midst of their frustrations. The research of *You Lost Me* recaps the stated concerns in this way: “They find the church to be: Overprotective...Shallow...Antiscience...Repressive...Exclusive... (and) Doubtless.”<sup>77</sup> Certainly every generation has produced a similar laundry list – even including biblical characters like Jeremiah. The opening quote of this chapter clearly demonstrates the prophet’s doubt. And still, there appears to be something uniquely at work with the great sense of consensus among the emerging generation with these grievances.

As the title of the book indicates, these are the reasons many young people say to the Church, “You lost me.” And at the intersection of all these topics is the sad truth that these young adults truly don’t “feel safe admitting that faith doesn’t always make

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<sup>76</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1429–30.

<sup>77</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1457–68.

sense.”<sup>78</sup> It occurs to me that many adults also struggle with some of these same issues.

However, it would appear that younger believers are no longer able to live with the inevitable tensions of balancing some of these conflicting thoughts because they have not seen elder believers openly share similar struggles.

How will the Church respond to this level of disengagement? Within these issues themselves is a stated distrust of the inflexibility of faith and practice. Will the future of many mosaics be defined by their need to create a distance from culture shaping institutions like the Church?<sup>79</sup> The answer remains to be seen. From previous research, it is true that faith communities have been accused by “de-churched” young people of being unable to help them deal with real-life concerns in ways that are both practical and faithful.<sup>80</sup> It is no small wonder that spiritual wandering takes place. But there is hope in the possibility that an authentic response from the Church and everyday believers might help renew a journey of walking with Jesus in a way they personally own.

### **The Response: Demonstrating that Hope Can Be Found**

If hope is indeed to be found, Kinnaman highlights critical responses that should be considered to again reconnect with mosaics. The faith stories of this generation are obviously still being written. Found within *You Lost Me* are viable steps with potent guidance to be considered. Among the recommendations found within Kinnaman’s work, three themes reinforce much of the prevailing chorus of support that has been echoed in other places in this thesis. To stem the tide of this generational drift, we must focus on relationships, translation, and authenticity. While other aspects of these dynamics are

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<sup>78</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 1470.

<sup>79</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 736.

<sup>80</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1590–1596.

found in *You Lost Me*, for the purposes of this literary review, these sufficiently cover much of the response needed.

It is no surprise that a renewed focus on creating full-fledged relationships with struggling mosaics will be key to a hopeful response. This generation is deemed “highly relational in many respects (especially when it comes to peers),” and even their familial connections are of significant importance to them.<sup>81</sup> When it comes to issues of faith, however, these same twentysomethings often describe feeling “isolated from their parents and other older adults.”<sup>82</sup> These young adults who have grown up in our churches – but not necessarily matured in their faith ownership – feel that they have been left alone by the older generation, misunderstood and without guidance. Kinnaman reports, “In fact a majority of the young adults we interviewed reported never having an adult friend other than their parents. Can the church rediscover the intergenerational power of the assembly of saints?”<sup>83</sup> This really is the crux of the issue for the Church to consider. With a great majority of mosaics (more than 80%) stating that they have never had an adult mentor, the task is clear.<sup>84</sup> It’s time to relationally get our hands dirty by investing in the lives of specific young people and children.

Another key to a hopeful response revolves around the word “translation.” For Kinnaman, greater understanding by the elder generations is not only possible, but it is essential to earn back the trust of mosaics. As we comprehend the gravity of their challenges, we can then grow to be “effective translators of faith to the next

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<sup>81</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 384–88.

<sup>82</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 388.

<sup>83</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 384–88.

<sup>84</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1966.

generation.”<sup>85</sup> We must, however, lead from weakness and transparency; we don’t have all of the answers either. We are only barely beginning to understand the questions of a generation that looks at life quite differently in many ways. For us, then, we must translate the deep truths of a relevant gospel to the felt needs of this emerging generation. When our effective response resides in the way in which we seek to translate faith, we can then be fully authentic in the way we communicate our relationship with Jesus. Kinnaman simply states, “The good news, however, is that the church is uniquely called to be the community of God— and true, authentic community banishes isolation, loneliness, and alienation and replaces them with love.”<sup>86</sup> Being the Church is a lot harder than it sounds. But translation is the most crucial step. This new normal must set up “new thinking...(that sees) the church (creating) a partnership of generations fulfilling God’s purposes in their time.”<sup>87</sup>

This sense of authentic partnership with Christian adults has been missing for mosaics. For them to have a durable faith, this partnership must become the goal of our discipleship to the next generation. Kinnaman reflects, “The next generation is caught between two possible destinies— one moored by the power and depth of the Jesus-centered gospel and one anchored to a cheap, Americanized version of the historic faith that will snap at the slightest puff of wind.”<sup>88</sup> Obviously winds and storms will come, so how will we help our young believers build their house upon the rock of Jesus Christ? (Matthew 7:24-27) Young believers are aware of the significant life choices that lie before them, but for the most part feel alone in facing them. If we respond with

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<sup>85</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 566–569.

<sup>86</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 749–751.

<sup>87</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 2407.

<sup>88</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 369–71.

authenticity and care, we can stand with them in the midst of the tough stuff. Kinnaman challenges:

The choices made in the first adult decade set the direction of life, as young adults make decisions about education, debt and finances, career, marriage, family, meaning, and many other critical matters. What influences will young adults choose to help them shape the lives they want to live? Will their faith—and faith communities—provide direction at these critical crossroads?<sup>89</sup>

We must help provide direction; we can respond. When we recognize in greater ways the need for deeper relationships, translation of gospel truth can be transformational. Led by an authenticity that demonstrates we will not abandon them, perhaps we can help them *both* be found and believe that their faith can make sense in the present age.

**Responding to Stuck Churches by Reflecting on *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* - Commitments and Connections that Create Culture**

“No longer can ministry with and for young people be handed off to a sole youth worker, paid or volunteer, and take place in the “youth room.” That reality not only changes the congregation’s posture toward youth ministry but also changes the expectations and ideas of what constitutes vibrant youth ministry. This makes youth ministry more complex, but it also makes it more central to congregational ministry...Looking behind the curtain of youth ministry calls into question a congregation’s view of church.”

– John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson,  
*The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*

A tremendous resource to add to the conversation regarding churches “stuck” in helping their youth have vibrant faith is *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, written by the team of John Robert, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson. These authors (from various denominations) share a passion for discovering the commonalities of congregations that successfully launch their students from their churches into adulthood with a faith that lasts. Together they formed the Study of Exemplary Congregations in Youth Ministry (EYM) with the goal of “identifying congregations that consistently

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<sup>89</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 448–51.

establish faith as a vital factor in the lives of their youth” and discovering “their effective approaches to ministry.”<sup>90</sup> The data collected throughout this EYM project formed the basis of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*.<sup>91</sup>

Not only does this resource provide an excellent framework for understanding the key areas of health in strong youth ministries, the way in which they have chosen to categorize their findings makes the data very accessible for congregations of different sizes and backgrounds. The authors seek to give this book as a “guide” for churches, though “we are not prescribing what (healthy youth ministry) should look like, rather we are describing what effective congregations believe and practice so that this may inspire and guide all churches in their ministry with youth.”<sup>92</sup> In working hard to provide such helpful descriptions, pastors and congregational leaders are challenged to understand the potential for maximizing their impact on the emerging generation.

There is such great hope in the way in which the authors describe the key findings of what their research has demonstrated. Primarily the culture and common commitments of individual congregations ultimately make the most difference in nurturing youth to have a vibrant Christian faith.<sup>93</sup> Much more than just great ideas, stellar programs or high functioning youth pastors, it is the unique mix of a church’s identity that proves the most fertile environment for growing up strong, emerging adults of faith.

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<sup>90</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle locations 294–96.

<sup>91</sup> With seven participating denominations, the researchers gathered survey data from almost six thousand pastors, youth pastors, and volunteers involved in youth ministry in 131 different congregations. After evaluating these surveys, twenty-one congregations of various sizes – and from each of the participating denominations – were selected for site visits and interviews, based on the high scores of their surveys. Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 365.

<sup>92</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 391–393.

<sup>93</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 213.



As congregations examine how this research establishes markers for health, church leaders can become intentional about the key commitments that create a culture that inspires faith. First, the authors reaffirm the premise that healthy youth ministry is not only the responsibility of the whole church, it must be part and parcel of an integrated vision of the whole church. Second, the consistency found among the most exemplary churches show the quality ways in which those churches live out their overall care, sense of connection with and commitment to these young people and their families. Last, the authors provide a hopeful pattern of response for congregations (and even parachurch ministries) to deliberately create a healthier culture for faith nurture.

Not only does *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* offer practical steps for churches and ministries to consider, the authors also deliver ample evidence (complete with massive lists!) that demonstrates that there are common denominators within communities of faith that produce faithful results. The authors allege, “We all have read research studies and reports about the lack of committed faith in teenagers today, but that is not the whole picture.”<sup>94</sup> For these authors, the “whole picture” is the role and responsibility of the church to make the faith vitality of their young a priority. When that happens, their research shows that graduates from these exemplary churches have been stimulated to “possess a desire to know and follow God (in a way) that defines them, shapes their character, and guides their lives.”<sup>95</sup>

### **The Main Motif: The Whole Church Creates a Healthy Culture**

From the significant findings of the researchers in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, it is clear that the impact of the culture of the whole church is of utmost

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<sup>94</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 210.

<sup>95</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 211.

importance. For the churches who realize this, investing in youth ministry comes from not as just a slice of the church; instead “the entire congregation contributes substantively to faithful and effective ministry with young people.”<sup>96</sup> And this contribution goes far beyond simple programming. The authors report, “(The) genius (of these churches is) a systemic mix of theology, values, people, relationships, expectations, and activities.”<sup>97</sup>

Within this mix, a unique church culture is created. Andy Crouch describes culture as the ways we go about “shaping our world” and understanding how we fit into it.<sup>98</sup> While this may seem like a simplification of a very complex reality, the power of culture proved a dominant theme described by those surveyed in the EYM project. To get to the heart of culture from their perspective, the authors state, “Congregational culture is more than the sum of what people bring with them and more than a mirror image of the theological tradition they represent. It is a unique creation, constructed out of their interaction together over time.”<sup>99</sup> Culture is so potent in setting the tone and feel of an environment; and yet at the same time, it is often allusive to clearly define. From the repeated themes found in their studies, the authors maintain that “four spheres of relationships and practices intersect and powerfully impact the lives of young people in the EYM congregations.”<sup>100</sup> These churches reported consistently high marks in establishing these different aspects: intergeneration ministries, effective age-level youth ministries, parent faith care, and competent, faithful leadership.<sup>101</sup> It is within this

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<sup>96</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1802.

<sup>97</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 972–74.

<sup>98</sup> Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), Kindle location 3128.

<sup>99</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1003–1005.

<sup>100</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1064–65.

<sup>101</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1066–75.

combination of these essentials that the congregational faith development of youth can happen.

With such a commitment to invest in the lives of the children of the congregation, this high value of congregational nurture is embodied in two specific ways: “the theological commitments of the congregation and the quality of community life.”<sup>102</sup> The ways that two factors reinforce and complement each other is a key task of all in church leadership, building upon each other in a cumulative way.<sup>103</sup>

Another common way that these congregations find unity in their vision for ministry come with crafting a consistent language to talk about church-wide discipleship for all ages. Whether it is articulated specifically in the church’s mission statement or in less formal ways, by utilizing shared patterns and approaches, the wider congregation strengthens their investment in ministry to their youth.<sup>104</sup> A very helpful tool found in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* is called “Faith Assets,” which is a description of some of the “common language (that can be used) to involve all members of the congregation in discovering their role in the lives of young people.”<sup>105</sup> Later in this thesis, a survey that uses this asset tool will be examined within my own congregation to measure its strengths and weaknesses. To best depict the students who reported having a vibrant faith, the authors have summarized their findings with seven descriptions: a personal pursuit of spiritual growth, the practice of faith in community, making their Christian faith a way of life through service, moral responsibility, and possessing a

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<sup>102</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1560–62.

<sup>103</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1151–52.

<sup>104</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2482–85.

<sup>105</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1383.

positive outlook on life.<sup>106</sup> These factors are present in the lives of these students as they have been inspired and encouraged by the truly positive environment of the wider church, not just with wishful aspirations. Community-wide ownership of everyone sharing the responsibility to find their place in helping vibrant to happen for every young person in their midst that makes these churches exemplary.

The very “posture” of the church and its leadership – and how high these leaders set the “expectations and ideas of what constitutes vibrant youth ministry” – is an example of lived-out commitment.<sup>107</sup> Certainly with greater congregational coordination and emphasis comes greater complexity, but it leads to a clear statement from the congregation: youth ministry is “central to congregational ministry.”<sup>108</sup>

Such intentionality of care must permeate the entire culture of the church. Everyone is called to be onboard with this direction in tangible ways of involvement; it is just expected. This high bar of expectation leads to high levels of quality in both the teaching and theology of the church, leading to the formation of quality connections. Setting such a high standard is steered by the guidance of strong leadership throughout the congregational organization. In fact, the authors boldly declare, “If a congregation is not willing to make this commitment, youth and youth ministry will always be tangential and second rate. Congregational commitment to young people is at the heart of effective ministry with youth.”<sup>109</sup>

There are several theological tenets that help form the healthy dynamics that instill such commitment across the board. First, students themselves are nurtured in their

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<sup>106</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 213–26.

<sup>107</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle location 177.

<sup>108</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle location 178.

<sup>109</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 245–46.

personal relationship with Jesus in a way that is powerful and personal. They report being “keenly aware of God present and active in their lives, the lives of others, and the life of the world....God is experienced as an active presence, a ‘friend’ who contributes to their lives.”<sup>110</sup> This faith experience stands in stark contrast to the perspective of “moralistic therapeutic deism” that was examined in *Soul Searching*. For these youth, their faith appears to grow beyond something that they just talk about or theorize about – instead they report experiencing “God at work” among the whole congregation.<sup>111</sup>

A second aspect of the theology that a church specializing in nurturing deep faith underscores is the belief that young people are fully part of the Church today – and not just in the future. Students responded positively in surveys that they felt “very much a part of the larger life of the congregation.”<sup>112</sup> Leaders in such settings strive for young people to become “fully practicing participants.”<sup>113</sup> These students know that their voice matters in such churches and they are invited to engage in ministry in practical ways.

A third way in which a church’s theology inspires a quality experience for young believers relates directly with a “communal awareness of participation in God’s presence and action that permeates the values, relationships, and activities of these congregations,” leading these students to express their faith as one transformed in the context of church as family.<sup>114</sup> A key refrain that was found in the research was that church for these youth is a “safe place” where youth clearly communicate that they “value being together with adults and each other.”<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 516–18.

<sup>111</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 233–36.

<sup>112</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 542.

<sup>113</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 559.

<sup>114</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 237–40.

<sup>115</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1727–28.

This commitment to quality connection is elevated by the practical programming of a church's ministry to age-level efforts with teenagers. These experiences range from youth leadership to retreats and mission trips; from Bible study, prayer, and youth oriented worship to small groups, often complemented by intergenerational activities.<sup>116</sup> Any congregation that does the hard work of effectively hosting these settings goes well beyond simply saying that care and connection matters but they demonstrate that ministry priority in practical ways.

It is certainly not a new thing to call churches to specialize in relational ministry to youth. However, a congregation's specific commitment (from the lead pastor to the lay person) to "go deeper than 'friendliness' with young people (where) there is substance, content, and commitment in these strong bonds."<sup>117</sup> It would appear that for all members of such congregations, the value of individual students – not just the youth ministry itself – was a significant concern. In language that reflects my own thesis of connecting the dots in community through a relational constellation, the authors highlight just such a "web of relationships" that begins encouraging children long before they even land in the youth ministry program, even leaders taking time to know these children by name.<sup>118</sup> Creating such a network is an urgent task for congregations that desire quality ministry. The authors speak to it this way: "These youth were surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence. They were immersed in a larger, multi-generational community of quality relationships informed by faith in Jesus Christ."<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 261–66.

<sup>117</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1743–47.

<sup>118</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2683–87.

<sup>119</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1794–95

Growing up in these churches their whole lives, these students don't know any different – and perhaps even take for granted the beautiful gift that such dedication creates.

One final quality element consistently discovered in exemplary congregations is that wider church leadership clearly demonstrates their personal investment in ministry to students. This trickles down to create strong Christian leaders within the group of teenagers themselves. Often, this success is best attained by the lead pastor's personal "love for and support of young people" in concrete ways.<sup>120</sup> Healthy partnership throughout the adult leadership structure (lead pastor, youth ministry, and adult volunteer leaders) is crucial in giving a sense of stability for students. Simply put, this also models a path of discipleship that honors the fact that relational mentoring normally only pays dividends if there is guidance throughout the whole process.<sup>121</sup>

As students grasp the significance of personal growth in their faith, the most effective programs capitalize on the growth of students by involving them in specific leadership roles. Far beyond just patronizing youth with meaningless tasks or projects, the churches that demonstrate high quality involve students with roles of real responsibility and importance, even providing necessary training to help develop these young leaders.<sup>122</sup> The EYM team designates this "empowerment approach" to leadership as a key component.<sup>123</sup> Quality begets quality – the greater the investment of a congregation in the spiritual lives of their youth, the greater the chance that the students of these churches will graduate with exemplary faith.

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<sup>120</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3764–66.

<sup>121</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2874–76.

<sup>122</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3959–61.

<sup>123</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3987–89.

### **The Response: Creating a Healthier Culture for the Whole Church**

After processing the research in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, one can be overwhelmed in trying to determine which of the potential steps for improving a church's focus on youth should be implemented. But at the same time, there is much hope that an overarching response can be fashioned to commit to be about the business of creating culture. Truly, while creating a congregational culture can appear like a "fuzzy" goal, the authors have pointed out some key elements in cultivating such a nurturing atmosphere for spiritually supporting teens and their families in churches.

Great faith encouragement happens when churches effectively seize crucial developmental moments with their teens and leave an impact that lasts.<sup>124</sup> To sum up the consensus areas that these faithful churches focused on in their efforts, it comes back to being "relationally-based" in ministry.<sup>125</sup> These congregations have found it crucial to spend time crafting relational connections in an overlap of departments – from family ministry support to age-specific programming to intergenerational friendships. This takes a lot of time to develop, but the payoff is obvious. Also, in every area of leadership, there is an intentionality in the response of these churches that provide an excellent challenge and model for other churches to consider.

Congregations that meet the goal of growing up faithful young people frequently report that the relational investments that adults in the congregation make to support their teens (as mentors, small group leaders, etc.) provides the "centerpiece" of their

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<sup>124</sup> Overall, the EYM study received responses from over 2,000 students (as well as onsite visits to 21 churches) and overwhelmingly the students report very positively about how their involvement in these churches translated into a deepened faith in Jesus. Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2153–56.

<sup>125</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2360–62.



approach.<sup>126</sup> But wise churches don't simply rely on youth leaders alone. They also maximize their partnerships with families. It is affirmed time and again that these partnerships "create a working synergy that enables the congregation, its youth ministry, and the families to nurture and support the lives and faith of their young people."<sup>127</sup> This only happens through partnerships committed for the long haul.

There also must be a balance in seeking an overlap of the different integral parts of successful ministry to families as well as students. The authors ask key questions that should lead ministry leaders to wrestle with the right balance: "Where is the primary focus and energy for your congregation's youth ministry—in the whole congregation, in the youth ministry programs, or in the family and household?"<sup>128</sup> Seeking this balance must be consistently communicated and driven by leadership from the top down.

Other authors have highlighted these three arenas as essential in faith formation. In fact, Ben Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence in *The Family-Friendly Church* point out these balanced sectors of ministry as a "three-leaf clover" – essentially interconnected and complementary to each other as faith formation is encouraged.<sup>129</sup> The growing expectation of such a congregation is that everyone has a role to play in seeing a church's youth ministry thrive. And for leaders and parents who have a stake in the faith development of these students, it becomes apparent that such mutual discipleship also nurtures the faith of the adults as well.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2360–62.

<sup>127</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3266–70.

<sup>128</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2993–94.

<sup>129</sup> Ben F. Freudenburg and Rick Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church* (Loveland, CO: Group Publishing, Inc., 1998), Kindle locations 1326–29.

<sup>130</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3023–28.

The researchers from the EYM project passionately assert that it is possible for any congregation to shift their new culture to better focus on ministry to youth. To have the right response, it takes dedication and intentionality! Exemplary Youth Ministry is birthed by exemplary churches that specialize in producing quality efforts toward a church-wide ownership of the success of youth ministry. With such a rallying cry, these effective churches set a pattern for the rest of us to consider. And if we truly desire to see churches become “unstuck” in our response to healthy and vital faith to stay part of the lives of our young people, we will get busy attending to the culture of our churches. As Andy Crouch declares, “Christian culture making grows through networks, but it is not a matter of networking. It is a matter of community – a relatively small group of people whose common life is ordered by love.”<sup>131</sup> It takes a church, a community ordered by love to growing a new reality for their whole church, so that our youth will stay vital for the long haul.

**THEME: Responding to Uncertain Parents**

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NIV)

“Parents and significant adults play an important role in the faith development of adolescents. We can no longer allow the Church and the family to assume that their tasks are mutually exclusive. The youth worker’s role as an equipper must focus on parents as well as teenagers because both live in a relationship together. In a society that continues to put stress on the traditional family structure, the youth worker must remain committed to recapture the family as the context in which faith is primarily formed.”

– Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*

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<sup>131</sup> Crouch, *Culture Making*, Kindle locations 2953–54.

One of the secrets you will learn about in these pages is the strategic priority of undergirding nuclear families with the rich support of the extended Christian family of the church. When these two formative families work in concert, we are most likely to see youth growing into a faith that lasts for the long haul.

– Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*

Over the last twenty years, there has been a growing emphasis on creating and supporting “family ministry” within the church. While various definitions exist in describing exactly what family ministry is about, one consistent element has to do with shifting the focus toward the parents and equipping them to better provide spiritual support for their children. Authors like Mark DeVries (*Family-Based Youth Ministry*) and Ben Freudenburg (*The Family Friendly Church*) began to push churches to think differently about the interplay between church programming and faith investments in the home. I have heard some humorously descriptions about trying to define “family ministry” as akin to “nailing Jell-o to a wall” (not easy to do!). Some of these books have helped to set a framework for talking about the ways in which parents can live into their roles as faith influencers for their families.

A variety of obstacles prevent parents from taking steps to be more active in the faith lives of their children – and sometimes even their own faith lives. Sometimes, the very way that we have set up the congregational curriculum for our children stands in “direct opposition” to encouraging our parents’ confidence to take the lead in faith conversations with their kids.<sup>132</sup> Freudenburg highlights the goal of a “shift from a church-centered, home-supported ministry model to a home-centered, church-supported ministry model” as a philosophical change that should be embraced.<sup>133</sup> DeVries shares a similar move toward a balanced approach, where church leadership makes a “strategic

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<sup>132</sup> Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Kindle locations 302–307.

<sup>133</sup> Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Kindle locations 316–21.

priority of undergirding nuclear families with the rich support of the extended Christian family of the church. When these two formative families work in concert, we are most likely to see youth growing into a faith that lasts for the long haul.”<sup>134</sup> There is great potential in this kind of “partnership” (again, a key buzzword among “family ministry” resources) to help the church make the necessary changes to help parents grow in their certainty – both in the understanding of their God-given responsibility and in embracing practical ways to fulfill that responsibility.

DeVries reiterates several themes already present in this thesis as he diagnoses a drastic shortcoming of the style of “traditional youth ministry” that has led to the “the isolation of teenagers from the adult world and particularly from their own parents.”<sup>135</sup> He continues his examination by asserting, “We can find the primary cause of the current crisis in youth ministry in the ways that our culture and our churches have systematically isolated young people from the very relationships that are most likely to lead them to maturity.”<sup>136</sup> All of this must really challenge us to wonder how we might best make the necessary shifts to bring confidence to our parents, and then implement changes in our congregations that can inspire this new reality.

To investigate the key dynamics involved in how ministry can effectively respond to the struggles of uncertain parents, I will reference two remarkable books: *Sticky Faith* (by Kara Powell and Brad Griffen) and *Think Orange* (by Reggie Joiner). These two books have started movements that are engaging churches and Christian parents across the country. And while the scope of each of these resources recounts ministry issues

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<sup>134</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 17.

<sup>135</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 21.

<sup>136</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 36.

beyond that of family faith, they both do a tremendous job of elevating the potential impact of parents as they pass on their faith. In both their similarities and differences we find a bevy of useful and accessible schemes to provide guidance and encouragement for parents – and for church workers.

**Responding to Uncertain Parents by Reflecting on *Sticky Faith* - Practices and Preparation that Helps Faith “Stick”**

“Your faith is not spoonfed to you anymore after high school. You don’t have anyone looking over you when you step into college to make sure you are going to church or to see if you are getting plugged in somewhere or to see if you’re having a ‘quiet time.’ You now have to claim it on your own and be able to walk on your own two feet.”

– Julie, a college-aged student quoted in *Sticky Faith*

“Walking on your own two feet” provides an excellent metaphor for maturing in faith. As mentioned throughout this thesis, for many young people who have come through our youth groups, “walking on their own feet” has proved a struggle, often more like stumbling. For many believers, much of our faith is about falling into the arms of a graceful savior. It is only by his grace that we can take another step of faith. But we must not miss the important point that Julie is makes here. She is speaking about a new season of life – one normally without any level of accountability from caring elders. She is also speaking to unhelpful patterns that we in the church have unwittingly inflicted on our children, enabling an immature faith. Again, the paradoxical dynamics involved in helping with the spiritual development of our young people arise. Thankfully, another comprehensive source at our disposal as we wrestle with these issues is *Sticky Faith*, by the writing team of Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffen. They worked intimately with the Fuller Youth and Family Institute to conduct a longitudinal study about how well the

faith of high school youth group kids “sticks” and stays strong during and beyond their college years.

There has been a kind of ripple effect throughout the youth ministry world due to the work of the *Sticky Faith* project. It drives home the point that intergenerational ministry must be the concern of the entire church, no longer just for the youth pastor. Unfortunately, it is beyond the scope of this section to delve deeply into every aspect of their work, but there is much to consider regarding parents who desire a greater proficiency in their role in building a nurturing faith.

Again we see reflected in *Sticky Faith* the strong conviction that the fostering of Christian faith that lasts should be the concern of all. The authors boldly state, “The reality is that Sticky Faith isn’t just a youth ministry issue. It’s a whole church issue.”<sup>137</sup> And since it is a whole church issue, the solutions will have implications on all aspects of those key adults who play a role in supporting children. Prior to contemplating specific implications of *Sticky Faith*, it is crucial to decipher some of the results of their research.

In assessing the strength of Christian faith of most active high school youth, Powell and Griffen claim that the faith of most kids is not like duct tape; instead it is “usually more like Scotch tape or masking tape. Maybe, just maybe, that faith is cohesive enough to hold them together through high school. Just barely. But then they graduate and tragically fall away.”<sup>138</sup> They back up this statement with this data: “...our conclusion is that 40 to 50 percent of kids who are connected to a youth group when they graduate high school will fail to stick with their faith in college.”<sup>139</sup> Moreover, most who

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<sup>137</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2931–37.

<sup>138</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 56–59.

<sup>139</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 93–95.

did float away from their faith had expected to stay connected with their faith. Put plainly, the authors declare, “Only 20 percent of college students who leave the church planned to do so during high school. The remaining 80 percent intended to stick with their faith—but didn’t.”<sup>140</sup> There is some encouraging evidence, however, that some students who walk away from faith only do so for a short time, with between 30 and 60 percent returning to active faith life in their twenties.<sup>141</sup> But these numbers do not give much comfort as we watch our own children walk away with no guarantees they will ever come back.

The findings of *Sticky Faith* are helpful, therefore, to bring before parents who want better for their children. To recap the most relevant aspects of their work, several factors will be highlighted to encourage parents to develop habits that can make a difference in the faith preparation of their children. First, I will again return to the common motif of the partnership between parents and parish as a dynamic that positively affects the stickiness of the faith of our youth. Second, I will give an overview the practical steps of faith preparation will reveal the certain difference that can be made when a commitment to setting the stage for the emerging generation to own their faith with greater conviction materializes.

### **The Main Motif: A Partnership of Parents and Parish Promotes Faith Stickiness**

For a ministry that is passionate about better strengthening the partnership of the wider church and the parents of that church, *Sticky Faith* offers key resources for guidance and encouragement. The material works well with church leaders and even with students, but it seems to speak most powerfully to parents. And it is easy to establish

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<sup>140</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 105.

<sup>141</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 106–110.

why. Mark DeVries plainly proclaims, “No one has more long-term interest in the students I work with than their parents do.”<sup>142</sup> Lessons learned from the *Sticky Faith* research is accessible for parents to recognize they can be equipped to help build a solid foundation for their kids. For far too long, faith development has been relegated to the work of the church curriculum and the pastor. Many others have been reinforcing a vital adjustment for those of us working in ministry by insisting, “Equipping parents for their work as the primary nurturers of their children's faith has been an essentially untapped resource in youth ministry.”<sup>143</sup> This kind of commitment to set up a successful partnership truly gives hope.

The *Sticky Faith* vision of a partnership is one based in the realities of our busy and hectic lives, but still brings such an optimistic call to families to become intentional. The parents I share this information with respond that they are personally challenged to see how the modeling of their own faith makes a lasting impact (“impression” – a la Deut. 6) on their own children. Overall, a pattern of relational ministry provides the key that can bring longevity to the faith of our young people – and that truly starts within the nuclear family. The researchers assert the following: “Read Carefully: Parents are usually the most important influence in their kids’ lives.”<sup>144</sup> This truth has been frequently echoed in other books (such as *Soul Searching* and *The Family Friendly Church*). *Sticky Faith* clearly articulates specific steps that could help better inspire parents to step into this nurturing role by creating space in family time for conversations about faith, by

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<sup>142</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 61.

<sup>143</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 104.

<sup>144</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1764–65.



inviting other key adults to invest in the faith life of your own children, and by providing a family environment that finds a balance between challenge and grace.

When it comes to nurturing faith, the authors stress that more conversations about issues of faith should be initiated by parents in practical, everyday ways. Consider these stats: “12 percent of youth have a regular dialogue with their mom on faith/life issues. In other words, one out of eight kids talks with Mom about faith...It’s far lower for dads. One out of twenty, or 5 percent, of kids have regular faith/life conversations with Dad.”<sup>145</sup> No wonder our young people do not count their faith as something that is very important to real life – they rarely hear from their parents about faith! It is never too early or too late to start these conversations. “Building Sticky Faith doesn’t start when high school students are seniors, or even juniors. The reality is that students’ faith trajectories are formed long before twelfth grade.”<sup>146</sup> At every point of their faith journey, our kids are watching what we model.

Another strategy for parents to grow in their “faith inspiration role” relates to inviting other key adults and families to participate in the life of their children as cheerleaders. While Powell and company declare, “There is no *Sticky Faith* silver bullet” when it comes to a quick fix of the challenges of lost faith in later adolescence, they do point to some hopeful connections.<sup>147</sup> The authors show that students who “experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity” and have a greater chance to stick with their faith.<sup>148</sup> Creating opportunities to experience a wider “family feel” for their kids, parents can find players who might best come alongside their

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<sup>145</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1780–86.

<sup>146</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 242–45.

<sup>147</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 258.

<sup>148</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1076–79.

children. *Sticky Faith* proposes a “5:1” relational model, where five adults pour into each young person in the congregation in multiple ways. This kind of investment pays off. Researchers determined, “teens who had five or more adults from the church invested in them during the ages of 15 to 18 were less likely to leave the church after high school.”<sup>149</sup> Mark DeVries spoke of this model in *Family-Based Youth Ministry* as well, reinforcing that those students who had multiple mentors “sticking with them” led these young believers to “stick with their faith” in a more consistent way.<sup>150</sup> Parents should play a part in setting up these friendships. *Sticky Faith* provides some great illustrations of this model lived out by parents in very practical ways. The authors strongly urge parents to “assume primary responsibility for linking their kids with five or more caring adults.”<sup>151</sup>

One additional way that parents can be trained is by assisting them to balance – extending both consistent grace and a helpful challenge to their students. As the researchers interviewed young people, they often discovered that the students were often confused about grace. Parents need to provide a healthy tension between lovingly accepting and forgiving children unconditionally, and at the same time giving firm guidance what will help them responsibly grow up. Parents and youth leaders, then, must communicate a coherent message of what the gospel of Christ is all about. Powell and Griffen found that faulty views of grace cause damage to long-term faith.<sup>152</sup> Parents need support from their church to “offer a balance of support and challenge.”<sup>153</sup> Max Lucado says it this way: “God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that

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<sup>149</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1146–49.

<sup>150</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 85.

<sup>151</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1402–06.

<sup>152</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 303.

<sup>153</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2345.

way.”<sup>154</sup> When grace like this is modeled at home, a person’s faith in Christ no longer stays compartmentalized but matures into what the *Sticky Faith* authors label as “whole-person life integration.”<sup>155</sup> And when a parent exerts that kind of focused stability of accepting the person and nudging their maturity, a child’s personal faith ownership becomes more sticky.

Beyond the involvement of youth in age-specific programs, the effect of the wider church is also significant. For relationally-sensitive adolescents, their sense of welcome and acceptance by the wider congregation is very important.<sup>156</sup> One of the discouraging discoveries relates to the sense of loss many students experienced. They reflect an absence of support from adults in their church as they begin to become “out of sight, out of mind.”<sup>157</sup> One key effort to deter such a mindset is offered by a plan that sets up an additional year of mentoring contact after graduation from an adult from the church with each graduate.<sup>158</sup> With such a significant transition, the wider church family should ramp up their support of these students and their families, not lessen it. When this support stays present in an ongoing way for our college-aged students, their faith stays stickier.<sup>159</sup>

### **The Response: Initiating Practical Steps of Faith Preparation**

If *Sticky Faith* has one aspect that is most appealing to parents, pastors, and youth workers, it is that is stocked with practical steps, including focusing on the priority of faith preparation. It is definitely a shock to hear from college-aged students about their lack of faith preparation. The authors share:

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<sup>154</sup> Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), 3.

<sup>155</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 203–205.

<sup>156</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 1113.

<sup>157</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1108–1110.

<sup>158</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 982–83.

<sup>159</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2153–57.

Only one of every seven graduates leaves youth group feeling “very prepared” for what college brings their way. According to students themselves, most youth ministries aren’t setting them up for success in the transition to college. This is especially tragic because our research shows that feeling prepared really matters. The more prepared students feel—whether that be to make friends or to handle new lifestyle choices—the more likely their faith is to grow.<sup>160</sup>

To establish a beneficial environment for a different level of intentionality around faith preparation, there are several items that are highlighted as essential. First, students need to have safe places as they come to own their faith, both at home and at church. Next, the right kinds of conversations need to be hosted well for these young believers to process their doubts and fears. Finally, essential skills need to be developed so that they are able to carry on their faith journey on their own. While these tasks may appear daunting and out of reach for some youth workers (especially part-time staff or volunteers), this focus should provide us with the hope! Relational and conversational proficiencies will better serve our students than big-bang programs and events.

One thing that cannot be emphasized enough is the genuine need for safe places and safe people for young people in the midst of their faith process. Parents and youth leaders need to set the stage for this kind of safety, which the authors call “a haven of love and understanding when they fall.”<sup>161</sup> Our church culture truly needs to communicate a sense of long-term commitment to our students as they figure out their faith – otherwise, it is totally unrealistic for us to ask them to have a long-term commitment to their own faith. When many of these former graduates feel their churches and leaders no longer care for them after graduation, we have not done enough to make

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<sup>160</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2572–75.

<sup>161</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 585–86.

the safe place that helps them transition well *with* a demonstration of ongoing support and care.<sup>162</sup>

As students grow in trust of their community – and exercise their trust in God as well – they can find sounding boards to talk through how they understand their faith in real life ways. The researchers found that the one thing that college-aged students most wanted to see from their former high school ministries was more time for deep conversation.<sup>163</sup> There are essential topics that seniors who are about to go through one of life's great shifts are aching to talk about. An essential curriculum list of topics should include moral choices, recovering from times of stumbling, managing doubts, finding new Christian friendship, and practicing faith in college.<sup>164</sup> It is also of tremendous help to find ways to include parents in conversations about preparing for college.<sup>165</sup> With parents and graduates sharing some of the same conversations – encouraged by trusted adults from their home congregation, faith that sticks is more likely to develop because students are thinking about key issues of life and faith.

Other needed topics of conversations were shared by those interviewed in terms of the kind of advice they wanted to pass on to younger peers. Not surprisingly, the primary message that was imparted was this: “Stay engaged with faith and other Christians.”<sup>166</sup> The researchers went on to discover that “less than 40 percent of students felt like their youth ministry actually prepared them to find a new church. Not surprisingly, finding a church was mentioned as one of the three most difficult parts of

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<sup>162</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2814–16.

<sup>163</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 1519.

<sup>164</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2779–2801.

<sup>165</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2710–12.

<sup>166</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2624–25.

the transition to college (the others were loneliness and finding new friends).”<sup>167</sup>

Obviously, it is a crucial area of growth for our churches and families.

But beyond just having conversations, our churches and families must offer unique and practical tools and experience for our youth to grow up with confidence in their faith. The development of key competencies should be part of any kind of preparation material.<sup>168</sup> Often, chances for students to grow into student leaders offers just such an appropriate avenue for helping students enhance their personal faith. The *Sticky Faith* researchers do affirm this path, with also a caution about giving students chances to lead, by stating:

In recent years, much of youth ministry...has shifted toward youth “ownership” of programs and practices. When done well, this movement toward youth empowerment has great potential to build both competencies and confidence. Yet we must be careful along the way to nurture leadership without letting kids burn out or making them feel like youth group is one more place where they have to show up and perform in certain ways in order to maintain our approval.<sup>169</sup>

We also must be careful to not let leadership opportunities devolve into token tasks without a sense of redeeming value. When developing competencies, we should continue to wrestle with a fundamental question: “What, then, does authentic, healthy ownership look like?”<sup>170</sup>

From the *Sticky Faith* study, other essential tasks must be practiced before graduation for the sense of a confident, vibrant faith to be energized for the duration. The realities of starting strong once a student leaves their home – and their home church – must be fully explored and suggestions offered so that these young people have

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<sup>167</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2599–2601.

<sup>168</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 2437.

<sup>169</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2445–54

<sup>170</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 2473.

visualized how they might best navigate these changes. Powell and Griffen plainly drive home the point of a needed strategy:

The first two weeks of college set the trajectory for the next few years. Over and over, students told us that the first two weeks at college are when many key decisions are made—about drinking and other high-risk behaviors, right along with choosing whether to go to church or campus ministry. Many of these decisions are influenced by the new friends freshmen surround themselves with and the new situations in which they put themselves. Most students are totally unprepared for the intensity of those first days and weeks, and have no strategy for how to make decisions during that critical time.<sup>171</sup>

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the daunting challenges that stand before our graduates – and thus, before us as parents and church leaders. But the work of the *Sticky Faith* project has set forth some stimulating ideas of how we can put best practices into play as parents and churches hoping to prepare our children well for such a significant transition in life.

**Responding to Uncertain Parents by Reflecting on *Think Orange* - Finding Synergy in a Powerful – and Colorful – Combination**

“Many of us believe that both the church and the family are at a crossroads. It seems we have arrived at a potentially defining moment in society in which the church is losing its influence and the home is losing its heart. Some say it’s time to give up on the church, or at least abandon the idea that the church in the form of an organized institution can have any lasting effect on the next generation.”

– Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange*

I think that Joiner’s allegation is correct. We are at a “crossroads” in our churches and our families about the mutual support needed to grow up a generation of kids with vibrant faith. As one arrives at a crossroad, choices need to be made. She could continue in the direction of the original path or she can make a drastic turn, either to the left or to the right, depending on her desired final destination. In *Think Orange*, Joiner clearly articulates a course correction needed in church ministry – and in family ministry – if our destination is to see the faithfulness of our church youth stay strong after graduation.

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<sup>171</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2592–97.

Joiner contends, “The premise of this book is simple: As long as churches do only what churches are doing, they will get only the results they are presently getting. And as long as families do only what families are doing, they will produce only the outcomes they are presently producing.”<sup>172</sup> Joiner points to statistics about the decline in students staying with their faith during the college years as “staggering,” with somewhere between 70 and 80 percent of active church kids now walking away from both the church and Christian faith.<sup>173</sup> He laments being in the midst of the Church “losing its influence with two entire generations.”<sup>174</sup>

Joiner uses *Think Orange* to propose a new path to be followed, with the great hope that it will lead to a different kind of outcome for our students. His creative approach of communicating a powerful partnership between church and family carries a tremendous amount of force. Joiner, too, is highly fond of speaking of partnership: “Partnering with the family may give you greater influence in the spiritual direction of the next generation....There are two powerful influences on the planet— the church and the home.”<sup>175</sup> Using the color palette, a model of thinking of crafting a combination of spiritual forces – from both the home (represented by “red”) and the church (represented by “yellow”) – generates a potent synergy of something new – “orange.”<sup>176</sup> This “third option” has so much potential, if both see the potential and invest in such a merger.<sup>177</sup>

*Think Orange* surveys the various sides of this blending of spiritual forces in the lives of our children. First, Joiner’s comments about the how to maximize both the

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<sup>172</sup> Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2009), Kindle locations 223–29.

<sup>173</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 469–473.

<sup>174</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 475.

<sup>175</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 165–67.

<sup>176</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1557–62.

<sup>177</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 202–204.



influence of the church and the influence within family systems will be examined. Finally, a range of responses to see coordination and collaboration of the best of both worlds will be studied. If we truly do find ourselves at a crossroads in making faith longevity a reality for the emerging generation, then we will find a very helpful map in Joiner's book.

### **The Main Motif: Amazing Potential of Mixing Yellow (Church) and Red (Home)**

Most of us are quick to recall childhood memories of singing “This Little Light of Mine,” complete with hand motions and energy. Even as kids, we knew that the purpose of light was to shine. In *Think Orange*, Joiner captures this scriptural vision and reminds us that the influence of the church is aptly communicated by the color yellow, called to be “bright lights” to a dark world.<sup>178</sup> This reflects the vision of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount: “You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:14 NIV). Joiner's criticism of the contemporary church revolves around the evidence that the life-changing influence of the church in the lives of our children appears to be waning. The church truly needs to light a fire under their passion to once again shine as an influence in our culture and in the lives of our families. Joiner also questions the reason behind the hesitation of many of our churches to think innovatively and change the old patterns of “doing church.” Last, he sets the stage for the church to be the initiator and trainer of parents to bring together the combined dynamism of both the congregation and the home.

To reignite a fire under the passion of the church, Joiner raises key questions about the diminishing influence of the church's witness to the world. Joiner compels the church to display God's glory to the world, through our ministry and good deeds.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle location 223.

<sup>179</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 288–91.

Joiner openly wonders if the church's damaged image with young believers relates to an "identity" crisis of sorts.<sup>180</sup> To better shine, we need to remember that it is Jesus himself who is the light of the world (John 8:12). And perhaps some of the machinery of the church, our busyness with programs and events have caused us to hide our true light – that being Jesus – under a bushel. To help people encounter the "wonder, mystery, and power of a God who is too big for them to define, yet who has proven through time and space that He loves them intimately," we need to retell the truth that Jesus is the light to guide their path.<sup>181</sup>

Beyond this core value of truly living out the good news of Christ in tangible and visual ways, Joiner also criticizes habits of church programming as being stuck in the "way we have always done it" mode. Considering the illustration of combining yellow and red to make orange, Joiner essentially is saying that often the church in practice only sees in monochrome – only yellow – and missing out on a larger impact through coordinated ministry with the family. Without properly "leveraging its influence to truly engage the family," the church sends the message to parents that it is the church that exists to be served by the parents instead of the other way around.<sup>182</sup> This viewpoint only adopts a consumeristic view of faith development and "fosters an unhealthy dependence" of families on the church being the sole provider of faith influence.<sup>183</sup> Creative strategies toward mutual partnership are needed to help church leaders initiate the right kinds of conversations with parents about how we can better join them in supporting the faith of

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<sup>180</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 347–49.

<sup>181</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 475–83.

<sup>182</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 247–49.

<sup>183</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle location 3219.

their children.<sup>184</sup> The church must have much higher standards for providing guidance for families. The wider church itself – and not just key staff – must support such a focus. Joiner reinforces that it takes more than one person to champion such a movement.<sup>185</sup>

In the color scheme of *Think Orange*, the family is represented by the color red for “warm hearts.”<sup>186</sup> It is obvious that many of our families are feeling overwhelmed by cultural pressures and the ever present expectations of financial stress, academic performance, and the never-ending comparison traps of contemporary parenting. As Joiner points out, most parents are passionate about encouraging their children to be set up for the “right things” in life (right college, right career, right friends, etc.); however, we often miss out on where our faith makes its way into our highest priorities.<sup>187</sup> If the church can inspire parents to embrace the vision of family faith – and practically support them to live into that vision, parents can see that they “have a role that is as critical as the church’s role when it comes to influencing the next generation.”<sup>188</sup> Parents and families need to be encouraged to see the spiritual impact that they can have on their children and this encouragement must come in gentle and affirming ways. So many parents are so incredibly stressed that the added intensity of faith influence may feel like be too much for them to bear alone. Thankfully, they do not need to bear it alone.

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<sup>184</sup> Some vital statistics will help set the context for these conversations. It is interesting to note that one study shows that “almost nine out of ten parents of preteens (87 percent) say they are satisfied with the quality of ministry and counsel their young ones receive from their church.... Thus, parents are happy, children receive some religious instruction and experiences, and churches are serving people.” Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 3212–14. But at the same time, “Only one out of five say they have ever been contacted by their church to discuss their responsibility to influence their children spiritually.” Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1325–26. Furthermore, Joiner reports that “the large majority of these churchgoing parents, around 80 percent, say the church has done little to nothing to help them become better at parenting.” The disparity of these numbers needs to be addressed. Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 2269–70.

<sup>185</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1211–18.

<sup>186</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle location 223.

<sup>187</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 719–22.

<sup>188</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle location 540.

Parents desperately need a clear vision of becoming a spiritual influence in the lives of their kids and what that can look like in real-life ways. Joiner does his own paraphrase of Deuteronomy 6:4-9 for parents by saying, “If you are going to impress these truths in the hearts...be more deliberate about creating a rhythm within your home...A host of things will distract you, and it will be easy to drift away from the importance of having an everyday kind of faith.”<sup>189</sup> Almost every parent I know would be quick to nod in agreement about the distractions that are so pervasive. And those same parents would also say that creating a rhythm – or even having space for such a rhythm – is a difficult challenge.

It is so important that church leaders communicate *we want to help with this challenge*. Joiner plainly asserts, “The sobering fact is that parents will have influence on their children. It can be negative or positive, but what you do will make an impact on your kids.”<sup>190</sup> Parents grasp that fact and feel the weight of such a responsibility. But our goal is not to “impress” anyone with our parenting skills, but instead “impress on (our) children the love and character of God” in such a way that the acceptance of our home is consistent in the good and bad days.<sup>191</sup>

All of these dynamics show our parents are stressed and pressed, so we as church leaders must have a posture of gentleness as we encourage their active faith presence in their children’s lives. A key part of our strategy must concentrate on over-the-top encouragement. If our goal is to equip parents with stellar skills, we shouldn’t “set unrealistic expectations...(and) create an atmosphere in which parents become

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<sup>189</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 969–72.

<sup>190</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 926–29.

<sup>191</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 609–12.

discouraged and children get disillusioned.”<sup>192</sup> Our parents are already paralyzed by crushing pressures, so we will only “sidetrack our ministries” if we pile on top of their struggles an unrealistic picture of what it means to direct their children.<sup>193</sup>

Parents really do desire help in shepherding their children and want practical strategies. Developing a vocabulary of “widening the circle” of influence so that parents can access other available adults from the congregation to support their children is a worthy facet of improving family faith support.<sup>194</sup> And our disposition must arrange support with an emphasis of really equipping parents with tools, not just pumping them up with inspiration and then letting them fend for themselves.<sup>195</sup>

### **The Response: Coordinating and Collaborating is the Best of Both Worlds**

To best shape a response to collaborate between the influential worlds of the church and the home, inspiration will not be enough. A clear strategy to equip parents needs to be designed, communicated, and implemented. Joiner upholds that both parents and churches are working hard for their kids, but their effectiveness is hindered by not working together, not working in sync.<sup>196</sup> Joiner gives this overview of “Five Orange Essentials” as a framework:

1. Integrate strategy to create synergy,
2. Refine the message to amplify what’s important,
3. Reactivate the family to build an everyday faith,
4. Elevate community to increase the odds,
5. Leverage influence to mobilize generations.<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 600–604.

<sup>193</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 605–607.

<sup>194</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1090–92.

<sup>195</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 2367.

<sup>196</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 260–62.

<sup>197</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1557–62.

First, a “family ministry” approach to coordination will give the right context for solidifying a ministry strategy and then communicating that message to all involved. This sets a contagious culture for inspiring “Orange” in motion and makes intergenerational connections a priority.

*Think Orange* suggests a robust, integrated strategy to this focus that helps youth ministry, children’s ministry, and nursery ministry to “lead together with the same end in mind.”<sup>198</sup> With such an overlap from the church’s side, this obviously helps with families who have children in different age groups. When the strategy is integrated in this way, an entire congregation is galvanized in the same direction. As Joiner points out, “Family ministry should not be another program you add to your list of programs. It should be the filter you use to create and evaluate what you do to influence children and teenagers.”<sup>199</sup>

Deliberate steps to collaborate send a powerful message for everyone in the congregation. Ministry that supports our children is *not just* about what happens at church – or within the walls of the home, Joiner succinctly states the truth: “It’s not either/or; it’s both/and.”<sup>200</sup> Joiner reminds, “The vast majority of parents already believe they are responsible for the moral and spiritual development,” they just need people to show them how.<sup>201</sup> As church leaders, we can provide them with energizing support to step into this role with more confidence. Parents have exponentially more time with their children to make a faith impression than do pastors or Sunday School teachers, so it is the church’s

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<sup>198</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle location 1794.

<sup>199</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1260–62.

<sup>200</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1434.

<sup>201</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1307–1308.

responsibility to train and equip parents to be motivated to make the most of this reality.<sup>202</sup>

*Think Orange* challenges us to make community building and intergenerational connections a value throughout the congregation. Families recognize that they cannot adequately spiritually serve their children alone. Joiner asserts, “A mother and father are not the only adult influences my children need.”<sup>203</sup> From the outset of this thesis, we have affirmed the loss of community for many of our adolescents. Joiner agrees with this viewpoint. “In a culture where community is not automatic and role models are limited, parents should become intentional about finding spiritual leaders and mentors for their kids.”<sup>204</sup> Church leaders then need to craft systems of intergenerational connections.<sup>205</sup> Joiner expands on this issue by stating: “When we talk about elevating community, we are talking about strategically placing coaches in the lives of our children and teenagers...Everyone needs to be believed in by someone, and everyone needs to belong somewhere. True community provides both.”<sup>206</sup> Several studies link long-term faith vitality to these kinds of mentoring relationships.<sup>207</sup> As parents multiply faith cheerleaders in the lives of their children, mom and dad’s confidence as spiritual leaders will grow and be encouraged.

There is much to be gained from the material from *Think Orange* and Reggie Joiner’s delivery is both convicting and hopeful. The truth is that our ministry to young

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<sup>202</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1297–99.

<sup>203</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle location 536.

<sup>204</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1098–99.

<sup>205</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1114–1116.

<sup>206</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 2592–2600.

<sup>207</sup> *Think Orange* illustrates Mark Kelly’s observations in this way. “Teens who had at least one adult from church make a significant time investment in their lives ... were more likely to keep attending church. More of those who stayed in church—by a margin of 46 percent to 28 percent—said five or more adults at church had invested time with them personally and spiritually.” Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 2603–07.

people stands at a crossroads and there is much at stake. By combining the influence of family faith and congregational ministry in a more strategic way, we can gain ground in helping our students with a difficult transition. Joiner continues, “When you elevate community, you do something that nothing in culture can match.”<sup>208</sup> The world can provide Disney-esque production quality, but it is just a show and distraction. When we *think orange*, we are providing a network of relationships that truly build up our children. As we in our churches engage this kind of thinking about faith “sticking” for the long-haul and imagine a colorful future of mixing the right ingredients of church ministry and family faith, we will be able to navigate toward the future in a much more confident way.

#### **THEME: Responding to Unfocused Youth Ministry**

Who do you think Paul is, anyway? Or Apollos, for that matter? Servants, both of us—servants who waited on you as you gradually learned to entrust your lives to our mutual Master. We each carried out our servant assignment. I planted the seed, Apollos watered the plants, but God made you grow. It's not the one who plants or the one who waters who is at the center of this process but God, who makes things grow. Planting and watering are menial servant jobs at minimum wages. What makes them worth doing is the God we are serving. You happen to be God's field in which we are working. (1 Corinthians 3:5-9, *The Message*)

“I frequently pray that our church will graduate genuine Christian leaders. When students exit our ministry, go to college, or enter the workforce, I want them to have developed the understanding that if they can't find a church in their area, they need to start one. That attitude is only realized if the youth workers continually move students toward taking leadership roles and doing ministry. I'm convinced that if students aren't given leadership opportunities, the chances increase that they'll graduate from their faith when they graduate from our ministry. Most teenagers are dying for an adult to believe in them.”

— Doug Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry*

Any serious look at the faith journeys of the young people in our churches must include an examination of the youth ministry programs. While not all youth ministry approaches are the same from church to church, there are some generalizations that can

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<sup>208</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 2728–2731.



be made about the impact that youth ministry has on the durability of the faith lives of the individual students who exit our programs. Certainly, it has been shown that the influence of the wider church and on the faith impact of the nuclear family are immensely formative for young people, but there is still much to be said about the age-specific ways that focused youth ministry nurtures a closer personal walk with Jesus, experienced in the midst of genuine community.

A great number of different angles could be considered as valid goals of youth ministry. Wayne Rice says, “The whole point of youth ministry is to bring adults and teens together so that the faith can be passed on from one generation to the next. If that's not happening, then the youth ministry should be discontinued.”<sup>209</sup>

At the same time, many critique traditional youth ministry models which focus on the wrong targets altogether. Jonathan McKee and David R. Smith wonder, “Could it be that today’s youth ministries are too focused on offering ministry TO teenagers instead of developing ministry BY teenagers? Maybe our ‘entertain me’ programming mind-set has lowered the bar for many teens.”<sup>210</sup> Even when we move beyond the fun and games and focus on genuine faith, there can be a blurry-eyed vision of our goal. Walt Mueller says, “....at times I am critical of the ‘faith’ we're calling young people to. For too long youth ministry has been about getting young people ‘saved.’ I struggle with our definition of what it means to be saved and the methods we employ to get young people saved.”<sup>211</sup> Obviously crucial clarification and focus is needed, but often in the realm of youth

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<sup>209</sup> Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), Kindle Locations 1043–44.

<sup>210</sup> Jonathan McKee and David R. Smith, *Ministry by Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle Locations 135–138.

<sup>211</sup> Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 14.

ministry, we lack attention to deeper theological ramifications of our programs and approaches.

To deal with the lack of focus in many of our youth ministries, we must know our target and clearly pursue faith goals that can live beyond the years we spend with our students in our youth groups. Jim Burns reflects, “One of the major goals of youth ministry should be to move the students from dependence on us— the youth workers— to dependence on God. Yet we need to remember that the process takes time.”<sup>212</sup> Burns clearly identifies the crux of this thesis project: We must recognize that faith development is a process that is messy and does take time. Therefore, we need to think with a long-term focus to nurture the faith of our youth so that it lasts for the duration. As Jim Burns asserts, “The bottom line of ministry is not how many kids are coming to our youth ministry but where these students will be 5 to 10 years from now and how we are preparing them to be lifelong followers of Jesus.”<sup>213</sup>

While numerous books could be considered as effective tools in bringing greater clarity and focus to our youth ministry programs, two significant works have been chosen to give insight and health to our approaches. First, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* by Mark DeVries will be evaluated with its excellent systems perspective. Truly, the concern of young people losing their faith after graduation is an issue of non-sustainability – and so the structure and framework of DeVries’ work is very helpful. In addition, *The Slow Fade* by Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith will provide a pointed challenge to traditional programmatic attitudes of “aging out” our students after high school and really

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<sup>212</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 7.

<sup>213</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 114.

letting them fend for themselves spiritually. This artificial finish line of faith has led to many discouraging results regarding the faith journeys of our students.

Many of the dynamics listed here – and specifically explored in *Sustainable Youth Ministry* and *The Slow Fade* – relate to the reality that our faith journey is very much a process. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, we can have the tendency to give our allegiance to particular mentors or leaders who have influenced our faith. But Scripture makes clear that it is God who makes the growth happen in every human heart. For those of us who have the privilege to watch this growth occur during a student's time in our youth groups, we should humbly be reminded that in many ways we are present for a short season in the larger scope of a lifetime. It is for this reason that we must have a clear focus on long-term faith for the days *after* they are with us. And these resources bring the right kinds of challenge to this dialogue.

**Responding to Unfocused Youth Ministry by Reflecting on *Sustainable Youth Ministry* - Discovering the Long-term Investment in Healthy Youth Ministry**

“An environmental architect begins with the confession that we have no power to make young people grow. We cannot make our churches or youth ministries or senior pastors into what we want them to be. We cannot make parents, volunteers and students do what we want them to do. What we can do is create an environment in which this kind of growth and change is not only possible, but probable.”

– Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*

I can speak from firsthand experience in my own church about the kind of difference that the insights from *Sustainable Youth Ministry* has made in the approach to leadership and program development for youth ministry. The 11<sup>th</sup> youth pastor in 20 years, I saw that all my church had known was turnover and burnout. Many in leadership felt like they only had two choices: Give up or invest. Thankfully, a core of lay leaders

prior to my arrival began to pour through *Sustainable Youth Ministry* and began adopting some of the tenets that Mark DeVries advocates.

While the pressure was felt by this team of parents and congregational leaders, they fully embraced a “new normal” for ministry at our church. DeVries writes, “Stop gambling, start investing and, in the meantime, do the best you can.”<sup>214</sup> They started to communicate a new way of measuring success in youth ministry and putting forth steps to set a new pattern.

Perhaps you’ve also seen churches in that quandary before, struggling with a sense of “stuckness” in seeking to address the challenges that just seem to show up time and time again.<sup>215</sup> For DeVries, the way out of this stuckness takes a kind of investment both to making resources available and to forming a philosophy that reorients ministry success in terms of health. Too often, churches say that their youth ministry is a priority, but fail to invest appropriately or even know what the best kind of investment would look like.<sup>216</sup> New definitions for church leadership are needed. Not only does DeVries declare that “success in youth ministry is measured in decades,” he points out that this is true for both the long-term faith vitality of individual students as well as for the ongoing effectiveness of youth ministry programs.<sup>217</sup> DeVries affirms, “Longevity simply works – on all kinds of levels. It forces us to face up to the patterns within ourselves that keep our youth ministries less than effective.”<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 12.

<sup>215</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 12.

<sup>216</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 31.

<sup>217</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 15.

<sup>218</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 124.

In addressing such unhelpful patterns, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* proposes new approaches to deal with unfocused youth programs. Primarily, DeVries advances that vitality come to churches that maintain a long-term focus on youth ministry instead of abdicating for relying on a quick fix focused on saved souls or numbers present. Then, like a good builder, DeVries suggests that it is essential to frame our programs with systems that sustain this kind of ongoing vigor. Finally, utilizing the metaphor of an “architect,” the author examines the most important “blueprints” and ministry strategies that gird up such a model. By giving attention to these measures, churches can see a new kind of vision of ministry to young people come into focus – with better results and outcomes.

#### **The Main Motif: A Long-term Focus Instead of a Quick Fix**

It is understandable why it is so difficult to think about youth ministry health with a long-term focus. Churches have *these kids* in their youth group *now*, and the pressure of making an impact on their spiritual lives, only in the present, leaves many youth pastors and churches programmatically near-sighted. But in the same way you really can’t buy healthy food in convenience stores; healthy process that leads to longevity is never really a “drive thru” kind of progression. DeVries argues for a long-term focus for a myriad of reasons, but three will be examined here. First, ownership for the vision of the youth ministry must be congregationally formed and not dependent upon one staff person’s tenure. Second, diligence must be exercised at all levels of church leadership to insure that new conditions that bring enduring vitality form and take hold. Last, consistently reinforcing the attention to the right details that foster this long-term focus needs to take place.

Far too often, churches rest their hopes on a “superstar” youth staff member and place their hopes and dreams on that individual’s ability to establish success in ministry.<sup>219</sup> Not only is this inappropriate on many levels, it is also almost always ineffective. These attitudes truly make for a “toxic culture” for both youth workers and youth ministry over time.<sup>220</sup> DeVries is not alone in his criticism of this viewpoint. Merton Strommen states, “The pressure to succeed is especially acute for youth ministers, who—despite their lack of knowledge, skills and experience—are expected to attract young adolescents to a life of commitment to Christ and the Church. It is a daunting task made increasingly difficult by the expectations of adults and a notable lack of congregational support.”<sup>221</sup> Without the wider church pledging specific ownership of the direction of the youth ministry, churches often just bring on a type of ministry mercenary that sets up a ministry that can easily fall apart or disappear with a crisis. Wayne Rice and Miles McPherson drive this point home as they reflect, “Like a light bulb attracts bugs, we expect the youth pastor to attract kids. When the youth pastor burns out, the kids go away, and the search for a new bulb begins (along with the hope that this one will last just a little bit longer).”<sup>222</sup> Of course, every church would deny they want to change youth pastors as quickly as people change light bulbs, but the sad truth is that often light bulbs outlast some tenures of youth pastors! A focus on the long-term is needed.

Throughout *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, the perspective is shared that if a church wants to build a strong ministry to students that lasts, it takes a great deal of perseverance. Constant communication from leadership must remind the wider

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<sup>219</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 49.

<sup>220</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 49.

<sup>221</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 40.

<sup>222</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 49.

congregation that the difference that their investments make will not just flame out like fireworks, but instead can be stoked like an ongoing campfire. It is ironic that this kind of commitment to patience sets up an environment that is much more conducive to seeing both paid and volunteer youth workers thrive rather than burn out. DeVries writes, “What I’m suggesting is that the more intentional a church is at building a sustainable youth ministry, the more likely it is that its staff will choose to stay for the long haul.”<sup>223</sup> As congregations build a model of ministry that is owned by the wider church, DeVries discovered an interesting paradox. “No church in America has sustained a large youth ministry (200 plus) without long-term tenure in its ministry DNA,” DeVries continues, “Ironically, it’s the long-term youth worker who is best positioned to build a youth ministry not dependent on him or her.”<sup>224</sup> But this kind of construction comes with patience.

It is truly a challenge to maintain focus and momentum, but this dedication is aided by the attention given to the right priorities. Quite often, as with any long-term building endeavor, there is disagreement about which ideas and initiatives deserve top consideration. DeVries makes clear that the right steps are essential for long-term sustainability. Contrary to the kinds of investments some churches make, DeVries stresses, “(that) gymnasiums, air-hockey tables, plasma TVs and leather couches don’t build thriving youth ministries; appropriate staffing, clear vision, and structure do.”<sup>225</sup> *Sustainable Youth Ministry* provides an excellent type of guidebook for ministry in terms of thinking about systems (like staffing, vision, and structure) and not just the latest fad

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<sup>223</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 127.

<sup>224</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 126.

<sup>225</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 34.

or idea. In fact, great ideas without great supportive systems might lead to a disintegration of ministry.<sup>226</sup> DeVries concentrates on the following “two key components of systems thinking in youth ministry: Architecture (the structures of sustainability) and Atmosphere (the culture, climate and ethos that sustain the health of an organization).”<sup>227</sup> These elements make up the essential building materials that frame up a strong ministry foundation.

### **The Response: Constructing Systems and Structures for the Long Haul**

With an effective focus that promotes such sustainability, DeVries maintains that key systems and structures are invaluable to insure health. Like Chap Clark in *Hurt*, DeVries observes the great lack in both our churches and our culture to create “nurturing structures” that support our youth.<sup>228</sup> The great strength of this systems approach is seen in two powerful ways. First, this systems viewpoint demands the participation of the entire congregation in the development of a vision and philosophy. Second, after such a process of planning is adopted, these systems will often last well past the tenure of a single staff member, no matter how charismatic or popular. This team-based method sets the context for young people and families to hear consistent messages and see consistent values in such a way that it helps carry faith longevity into the lives of individual students.

As mentioned earlier, the approach of *Sustainable Youth Ministry* fully relies on the entire congregation assuming responsibility for the direction of its youth ministry. This means that it takes excellent communication to help include all different levels of

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<sup>226</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 22.

<sup>227</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 53.

<sup>228</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 31.



people in your church community; the students themselves, their parents, key stakeholders and lay leaders, and the wider staff. As a newly built house may look great from the outside, we are often enamored by flashy programs and ministry ideas that just “look good.” But that house will not be solid and last if its foundation has cracks in it. In the same way, planning that “take place underneath” with issues of trust, clear expectations and ownership form the most solid groundwork for success.<sup>229</sup> Too often, church leadership doesn’t even consider these vision issues as it relates to youth and the outcomes are clear. DeVries quotes Andy Stanley’s excellent perspective to drive home this point: “Your ministry is perfectly designed to achieve the results you are currently getting.”<sup>230</sup> Youth ministry truly comes into focus the system design is prioritized.

When these steps are taken, a structure is set up that almost always is guaranteed to outlast any youth pastor or staff member. DeVries does a stellar job of pointing out the obvious fact for those of us who are called to vocational ministry. We are all interims!<sup>231</sup> Even if a pastor’s tenure at a church lasts into decades, she won’t be there forever. We must think beyond the staff as the critical element – and the good news for the health of our ministry: this leads to a vitality of support that doesn’t shift with every staff transition.<sup>232</sup> This long-term kind of focus is most effective if some core practices and plans are put into place.

As a kind of “blueprint,” *Sustainable Youth Ministry* makes for an amazing resource for churches committed to putting together plans for building something that lasts. To best communicate this, DeVries suggests using key “visioning documents” to

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<sup>229</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 53–54.

<sup>230</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 57.

<sup>231</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 92.

<sup>232</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 53.

reiterate and establish accountability that “galvanizes a team to move together in a single direction.”<sup>233</sup> Having such key elements is vital; such as a mission statement with stated ministry values, a list of long-term goals, ministry descriptions for volunteer leaders, and a clearly crafted organizational chart. With this framework in place, then, a congregation is poised to focus on the task of setting up its students to stay firm in their faith for their whole lives. DeVries advocates for a relational scheme of “multiple adults pouring into” the life of each student, so that this “young person is at the center of the web, a convergent community connected not only to him or her but also to each other.”<sup>234</sup> The model of this thesis, connecting the dots in community, owes a great debt to this aspect of DeVries’ work.

Overall, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* does a masterful job of elevating the programs established for our young people to be something that goes beyond just the fun and games. Like anything you want to see have a legacy, deliberate work to build it well from the ground up cannot be an afterthought. DeVries sends forth the challenge to church leadership to bring their youth ministry’s long-term health into focus by investing in the ways listed above. Certainly this does not alleviate the “messiness” of youth ministry, as DeVries admits, but this level of commitment to such a ministry vision will produces students of depth as well.<sup>235</sup> If we want to see our kids keep their faith, they need this depth to make it.

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<sup>233</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 64.

<sup>234</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 143–44.

<sup>235</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 56.

## **Responding to Unfocused Youth Ministry by Reflecting on *The Slow Fade* - Making Adjustments to the Finish Line of Faith Development**

“Most churches and families have programmed a finish line in youth or student ministry at twelfth grade. At church we push our seniors out the door, breathe a sigh of relief, and let them disappear for a few years. There is a mistaken assumption that they will spend the next four or five years solidifying their faith, starting careers, getting married, and showing back up at our churches when they are more ‘complete’ adults. So we let them go ... because that is what we are supposed to do, right?”

– Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, Abbie Smith, *The Slow Fade*

Building upon his earlier work in *Think Orange*, Reggie Joiner has produced *The Slow Fade* with two additional authors, Chuck Bomar and Abbie Smith. They take the passion of the philosophy behind the *Orange* movement and uniquely apply it to a critical slice of perhaps the most critical age group: college-aged young adults. The main theme that the authors poignantly maintain relates to the discouraging relational disconnection that is happening on many levels for the young adults of our churches. In exploring this problem, they champion a response of halting the slow fade one life at a time through a strategy of mentoring. This writing team brings their varied experiences together in dynamic ways, especially since one of them (Abbie) is a millennial herself. She sets a powerful tone at the outset of the book by sharing:

These are real friends of mine...(and) they all are becoming disconnected from their communities of faith. At a time in their lives when their faith should be accelerating, it has begun to dim. At a stage when they’re developing a new network of friends, there is a relational gap. At the moment they are beginning to wrestle with what they thought was certain, they are missing voices they know they can trust.<sup>236</sup>

It is the hope of *The Slow Fade* that the voices that have been missing would once again be heard and join in the chorus of support for our young families.

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<sup>236</sup> Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith, *The Slow Fade* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2010), Kindle locations 82–85.

### **The Main Motif: Disconnection is Happening at a Critical Time**

Making the case that this kind of disconnection is real for many young believers in our lives is not an earth-shattering claim. Instead, this season of spiritual hiatus has become so generally accepted that for a young person to hang on to their faith without wavering is considered an anomaly. But with this widespread admission of defeat, we must not miss the fact that most of our young friends newly out of college are extremely isolated as they are making some of the most formative decisions of their lives.<sup>237</sup> The authors point out that there is a mutual kind of disappearing act at work for a majority of our twentysomethings. Not only are we observing the “slow fade” happening for these young adults as they are “out of sight, out of mind” for most in the church; where they are “being ignored and gradually fading from view.”<sup>238</sup> But at the very same time, caring adults who have often spoken wisdom and encouragement into the lives of these very same young people in earlier seasons of their lives have vanished as well.<sup>239</sup> It’s not like people are intentionally meaning to leave so many in this generation without support and guidance, it has just become part of an accepted stage of life; one that has in some ways been going on for many generations. For my part as a youth pastor, the findings of these authors challenge me to be much more intentional with my ministry during this season.

We are in danger of misdiagnosing the absence of this generation from our churches if we place all the blame on these former students and some cultural accusation of laziness. Joiner and friends point to something much deeper. The authors observe, “College-aged people don’t cut themselves, suffer from eating disorders, change majors

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<sup>237</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 150–58.

<sup>238</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 87–90.

<sup>239</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 260–61.

seven times, change churches ten times, or abandon church altogether because they're flighty. They do so because they don't know where they belong."<sup>240</sup> Again, relational needs are driving the fade. And we must not be quick to judge that the preference of many in this generation is to be left alone. Joiner et. al. declare, "They're not fading from our faith communities because they want to; they're fading because they don't know where they belong. They've never been connected to a community of belonging. They've never been shown another way."<sup>241</sup> In order to show another way, Joiner, Bomar, and Smith offer a response that is driven by making changes one life at a time – primarily through mentoring relationships.

### **The Response: Halting the Slow Fade Happens One Life at a Time**

In a similar vein to some of the other books covered in this chapter, a high sense of the personal influence that can serve to halt the slow fade is present in the key argument of this book – but it must happen one life at a time.<sup>242</sup> The authors point to a needed evaluation of the ways that our unfocused youth ministries graduate our seniors out of the group. In a deliberate and strategic way, the core of this book's response can be summarized like this: to relationally invest in one college-aged student.

As church leaders, this means that our perspective of a ministry finish line in youth work must shift as well. The authors urge churches to make a critical decision by moving the "finish line from twelfth grade to the age of college graduation."<sup>243</sup> They are correct in pushing the wisdom of "protecting the investment" we have made in the kids of our youth group by spending our "best energies on the first few years of college" instead

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<sup>240</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 342–45.

<sup>241</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 846–47.

<sup>242</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 263–64.

<sup>243</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 163–66.

of considering our work done after their high school career.<sup>244</sup> It is key to remember that our faith never has a finish line!

The most practical response is to point this energy not toward a *program* but instead a *philosophy* of mentoring.<sup>245</sup> There are clear coaching tips in *The Slow Fade* to reinforce for mentors that they don't have to "change an entire generation; (instead) focus on building a relationship with one person. Nothing else is necessary."<sup>246</sup> They, of course, also highlight that when mutual friendship happens in such an open and powerful way, both parties walk away blessed and built up.<sup>247</sup> While there might be pressure for the mentor to feel like they must "fix" the issues for the young person, this will mostly likely stall the personal growth of that young person. We fail to be a healthy mentor if we treat a mentee as a project.<sup>248</sup> Instead, Joiner/Bomar/Smith beautifully state, "There's a child in every college-aged person, and there's an adult in them as well. The job of a mentor is to nullify neither and cultivate both, leveraging their youth while leading them into adulthood."<sup>249</sup> This kind of nuanced friendship building will only come with training and empowering our mentors to know that their primary role is to be a listener, not a speaker.

And the reason that it is so significant for us to listen to our college-aged youth is that they are all but silent in the church today.<sup>250</sup> The authors humorously summarize the call by declaring, "Our fireworks show is about thirteen words long: Halting the slow fade happens when adults start investing in college-aged people."<sup>251</sup> In echoing the

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<sup>244</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 170–73.

<sup>245</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 187–95.

<sup>246</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 699–701.

<sup>247</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 514–15.

<sup>248</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 551–55.

<sup>249</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 823–26.

<sup>250</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 808–11.

<sup>251</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 910–11.

sentiment of other resources considered in this thesis, they return to the major theme that “building a sturdy faith takes an intergenerational community. Spiritual maturity validates every part as crucial to the whole. We need one another.”<sup>252</sup> And establishing a format to affirm that we can provide our young people with deeper relationships with elders in our faith communities brings growth for all involved.<sup>253</sup> We know that some level of disengagement is to be expected during difficult life transitions, but the authors of *The Slow Fade* rightly challenge the Church to do all it can to shift the finish line of faith in a deliberate way and demonstrate their commitment to walk alongside our young people through these taxing seasons.

### **Conclusion: Variations on the Theme – Getting the Song Stuck in your Head**

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:3-6, NIV)

“Let me save you some trouble. Here is the gist...American young people are, theoretically, fine with religious faith—but it does not concern them very much, and it is not durable enough to survive long after they graduate from high school. One more thing: we’re responsible.”

– Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*

In reflecting on the reoccurring themes that make a chorus of challenge and encouragement for the Church to respond to the contemporary crisis of so many of our young people walking away from their faith, it can be exhausting to contemplate the various levels that we have examined in this literary review. And we can humorously agree with the teacher in Scripture when he warns us of the never ending making of books – and that such study can wear a weary person out! (Ecclesiastes 12:12) But the

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<sup>252</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 915–17.

<sup>253</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 1025–30.

faith of our youth matters to us and we know that they too are invited into the “partnership of the gospel” that Paul speaks of above. So while each person’s individual journey of faith is messy and full of bumps, we must hold on with faith that God will continue to the good work he has started in the lives of our students. At the same time, we as pastors, parents, and caring adults should attend to our own good work of assisting the preparation of these students so that they can carry their faith beyond high school – that their personal faith ownership would continue to grow in the context of community and thrive, not just survive.

To truly thrive, this chapter has given abundant examples of both helpful critique and practical strategies for all of us as churches to better help our young people endure in their faith.

To counteract the loss of community for this generation, *Hurt* by Chap Clark and *Soul Searching* by Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton speak to the realities of the ache of loneliness and confused faith, but also the hope of the elder generation reimagining their role of nurture to youth. As John Drane states, “So many people...are desperately searching for a place where they can belong and be valued. In a world of dysfunctional relationships in which people are hurting and constantly being put down ... the majority (are seeking) the entry point to anything that might be regarded as the fullness of life (John 10:10).”<sup>254</sup> These authors challenge the Church to make these entry points happen and bring hope to a hurting generation.

To react to the “stuckness” experienced in many churches that seem unable to create the momentum to help faith stay strong for our younger believers, *You Lost Me* by

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<sup>254</sup> John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2012), Kindle locations 3562–3564.



David Kinnaman and *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* by John Roberto, Wesley Black and Roland Martinson, offer strong research-based evidence that can encourage us that our “stuckness” need not be the end of the story. Both in clarifying specific issues that frustrate young believers away from active faith participation and in illuminating some very practical, congregationally-based solutions to better engage their youth in faith, these works can remind us that it is tough work, but that the work is worth it. And this work has a greater impact on the whole Church as Kenda Creasy Dean reflects, “If the American church responds, quickly and decisively, to issues raised....then tending the faith of young people may just be the ticket to reclaiming our own.”<sup>255</sup>

To fully utilize and maximize the power of family inspired faith, *Sticky Faith* by Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford and *Think Orange* by Reggie Joiner demonstrate that there is incredible potential to be found in the intentional partnership between family and faith community. Collaboration on this level pays considerable dividends. This kind of perspective is echoed by other writers as well. Rick Lawrence is quoted as saying:

Every youth ministry hour spent equipping parents to nurture faith in their teenagers is like giving money to public television: your gift is almost always doubled by a matching grant. Parents will always out-influence even a great youth leader, so it makes sense to invest where you'll get the best return.<sup>256</sup>

Investment is a significant part of the plans these authors advocate and in the unique blend of church and family, hope for stronger lasting faith can be found.

Finally, to concentrate on the shortcomings of many of our present models of youth ministry and better help our churches focus on producing a faith that lasts, both

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<sup>255</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle locations 95–97.

<sup>256</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 58.

*Sustainable Youth Ministry* by Mark DeVries and *The Slow Fade* by Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith bring specific challenges to wake-up our approach to youth ministry. Within their responses, good news is found. The authors of *Consuming Youth* provide an excellent summary of this important viewpoint – and really of the various concerns of this whole chapter:

Any youth ministry, any congregation or parish, and even parachurch organizations of any size have what's needed to cultivate a new ideology of youth. We know that teens are more than the script our consumer culture lays out for them to live by. We know that God has purposed teenagers to be more than consumers and more than the images that brands hold out for them to desire. We know that teens are more than the colleges they may or may not get to attend. And we know that vocation as a lived response to what Jesus has done captures and holds teens' imaginations and ignites their souls more than owning the next new gadget or being entertained ever will.

The hopeful message is this: All youth ministries, all congregations and parishes, and parachurch organizations of all sizes have what's needed to shape the sustaining experiences that support a new way of thinking about teenagers and that serve to lead teens through consumer culture. The challenge lies not in reinventing an old youth ministry model or even creating a new one but in simply rethinking, reimagining, and paying attention to what we're already doing. In the end it's about living with and walking alongside youth, making them an integral part of the community, not segregated from it. It's about being the deep and rich and whole community Jesus has called us to be. And that is well within reach.<sup>257</sup>

Perhaps an answer to the calamity of so many of our youth walking away from their faith is truly within our reach! If we listen to the reoccurring themes of these authors (among others) that make a chorus call of challenge to the Church, its parents and leaders, to our students themselves, perhaps we can heed their advice and devise appropriate responses to make the necessary changes. Perhaps community can be found for our youth – and for us as well. Perhaps our churches can no longer be “stuck” but instead be inspired to generate faith ripples that translate from one generation to the next. Perhaps our parents

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<sup>257</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2497–2508.

can gain confidence and certainty that God will provide what is needed for them to guide the faith of their children. And perhaps focus can be established in our youth ministries to partner and coordinate with all those who care about the ongoing discipleship of our children to see God's purposes for this generation realized.

That is a chorus – a kind of song – that I would love to get stuck in my head. “It is well within reach!” These authors have served us with their wise counsel and advice. May we be counted among the wise (Proverbs 15:22) and properly attune our plans to be in harmony with the Lord's purpose for the each of us (Proverbs 19:20-21): To be on our guard and continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 3:17, 18)

“CONNECTING THE DOTS IN COMMUNITY”

INVESTING IN A CONGREGATIONAL COMMITMENT  
TO PREPARE STUDENTS TO TRANSITION FROM HIGH SCHOOL  
WITHOUT GRADUATING FROM THEIR FAITH

A THESIS-PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF  
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

VOLUME TWO

BY  
CHRISTOPHER H. LYONS

MAY 2016



for Lisa,  
my wife and loving partner in ministry and life.  
Your support and encouragement  
mean the world to me.

for Katie, Nikki, and Joey  
I delight in you; I cherish you; you are very precious to me.  
May you each experience the ownership of your own relationship with Jesus,  
as we pass on our family faith,  
be part of a wider church family that wants to invest in you,  
to always see yourselves connecting the dots in community  
- a community that helps you grow in your love for Jesus.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This project develops a model for helping students connect the dots in community. This ministry vision for the church invests in a commitment to prepare students to transition from high school without graduating from their faith. Included in this thesis is a two-year Grad Prep Program designed to equip upper-classmen to prepare for this transition.

The bottom line of this thesis: a prepped faith is the best faith! A healthy church environment, confident family faith, and focused youth ministry can provide a significant launching pad for young believers to continue to grow in their ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ. By surrounding students with a network of faith-forming fellowship (a model called a “constellation”), students begin practicing seeking out such relationships of accountability for themselves in order to gain important competencies for their future.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE SOLUTION: SHIFTING THE PERSPECTIVE

#### A MINISTRY VISION THAT SEEKS TO CONNECT THE DOTS IN COMMUNITY A MINISTRY PROGRAM THAT PREPARES OUR GRADUATES

“Our goal is to facilitate movement from an unowned faith to an owned one that brings maturity and growth in Jesus Christ. In fact, one of the reasons we stay in youth ministry is because we believe that when adolescents are given the right kind of opportunities, they will make lifelong decisions to be lovers of God and passionate followers of Jesus Christ— in a stronger manner than any other age group.”

– Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*

We took you just as you were. We were never patronizing, never condescending, but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly. Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we did...With each of you we were like a father with his child, holding your hand, whispering encouragement, showing you step-by-step how to live well before God, who called us into his own kingdom, into this delightful life. (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8, 11-12, The Message)

“*WHAT IF...*?”

What if the children of our congregations knew that their wider church family was “not content to *just* pass on the Message,” but instead was dedicated to both the good news of Jesus Christ and so much more! What if these young ones sensed that their elders loved them dearly and were so committed to connect that they would give their own hearts? What if the older generations – as spiritual surrogates, caring mothers and encouraging fathers – actually modeled “step-by-step” what ongoing faithfulness in a personal walk with Jesus looked like? What if such full-fledged biblical community, built on love, were actually *found* in our congregations in tangible and powerful ways? What if our churches were so committed to inspiring a faith that lasts that they get out of the stuck rut many are in? What if the parents of our churches became empowered as

partners in building up the faith of their own children? What if our youth ministry programs became so laser-focused on developing a strategy of helping students to own their faith that a different kind of generation transition from our churches fired up to take their walk with Jesus to the next step and continue growing? And what if there was a coordinated facilitation of movement by all invested parties to see that spiritual growth happen in such a way that faith ownership lived out in the ongoing context of community would truly inspire maturity of “lifelong...lovers of God” who are practicing their faith in daily ways?

#### *WHAT IF...?*

The thrust of chapter four will insist that we don’t have to settle for wondering about the “what if’s,” but will demonstrate that we can take practical steps to dramatically shift the perspective of doing ministry in such a way that our entire congregation can become devoted to a ministry vision that connects the dots in community – and that this would be implemented by a ministry program that specifically prepares grads to keep their faith for the long haul.

We know that the problem of lost faith is pervasive in our culture. And we know that the clear picture of scripture paints an entirely different kind of picture when it comes to what community is all about. We have heard a chorus of prominent voices involved in ministry with young people declare that the time is *now* for something different, something new. And it starts with a change in perspective.

#### **A Needed Perspective Shift**

To discover different ways to see something new in the midst of our congregations who want to fully engage our young people with faith resilient for the



duration, we must realize that new thinking about ministry must happen. A paradigm swing must occur to see the challenges before us and translate them into opportunities to create a different kind of narrative. How different things look when we get a little perspective, when we take a new angle to look at something.

You know, my kids love to draw. Sometimes their masterpieces make it to the fridge, but most often we find the scraps of paper lying around the house. I'm always amused and amazed at the creativity of their work. But I was unprepared to pick up Katie's (aged 8) newest artwork. Here it is:

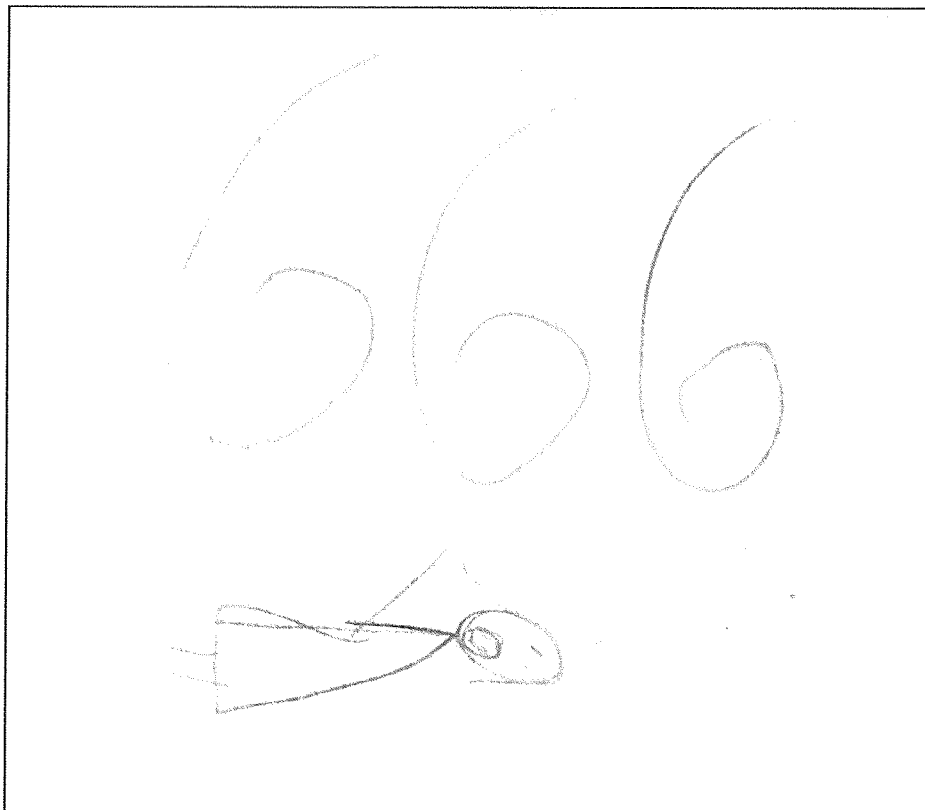
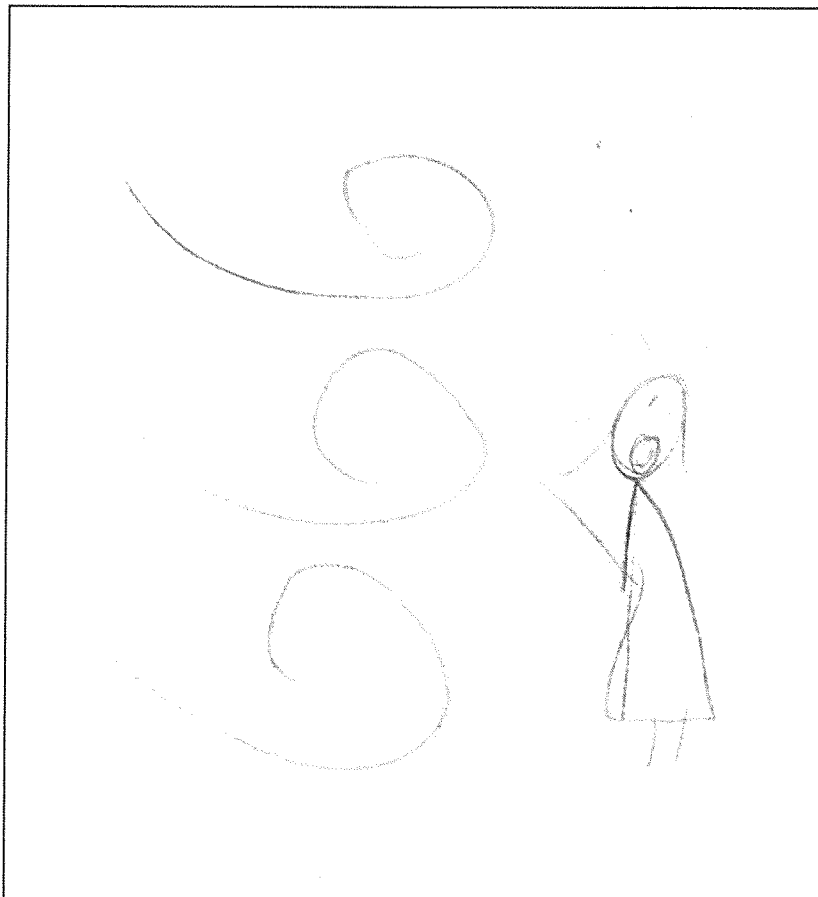


Figure 1 - Katie Lyons Drawing

Now, put yourself in my place. What would be going through your mind right now as you first saw this picture? “Did momma let her watch *The Exorcist again*? Has she been putting in overtime with the Ouija board *again*? Is it time for us to fumigate the

whole house with holy water...*again?*” Mostly, I was just wondering, “Huh?” A little later, I got up the nerve to connect with Katie and ask about her picture, trying hard to not appear concerned.

She looked up at me with disgust since I obviously didn’t know anything about art. “Daddy,” she said, “you are holding my picture wrong!” She then turned the sheet counterclockwise 90°. Things looked much different from this perspective.



**Figure 2 - Katie Lyons Drawing (Held Correctly)**

Katie continued, “We were talking about Pentecost at church and this is a picture of one of the disciples when the Holy Spirit wind came blowing in! Everyone was so excited!” All I could do was shake my head. What I thought was demonic was really holy. All it took was an angle change, a shift in perspective.

It is no exaggeration to say that in a similar way a slight shift in perspective could change everything we think about what ministry needs to look like for youth in our churches today. What we have viewed as insurmountable troubles may be exactly the chance for growth that each congregation needs. Can we get a new perspective on what it means to practice partnership together in our congregations with a great passion for discovering deeper community and creating a sky-full of connections among adults as well as students?

Jesus was the master both at creating community and shifting people’s perspectives on how they should look at life. Often he would simply state, “The one who has ears, let that person hear.” It is in that spirit that crafting a different approach to instill faith for our grads that is vibrant after graduation is pushing for a new viewpoint.

As we make the shift from an individualistic mindset to a sold-out commitment to community, the picture will be transformed. Hope will emerge and our congregations can be energized about making something better for our kids. This shift is truly toward the church becoming a “family of families” – dedicated to relationally help provide the kind of faith nurturing support that inspires durable faith for our youth. Mark DeVries asserts:

As perhaps the only institution left that's designed and equipped to work with entire families, churches today face an unparalleled opportunity to not only reach teenagers but impact entire families. But unless we make a shift in direction, the long-term return on our investments in youth ministry will be disappointing. Those churches that choose to place their emphasis on empowering the family and

the extended family of the church to do the work of youth ministry may be in for a wild ride. But the return on this kind of investment will be rich indeed.<sup>1</sup>

To better investigate this opportunity, there is good news to be retrieved about the openness of the emerging generation to adults who are serious about making the commitment to enter into relationships of encouragement. Research shows that young people are hungry for older partners to join them on their spiritual journey.<sup>2</sup> Specifically, the authors of *Sticky Faith* report that former youth group graduates wished for more input from their home churches and even “requested structured training on the transition (after high school) and how they could best get ready.”<sup>3</sup> As we take bold steps to make such connections happen, we’ll find a crystalized outcome for what these relationships can mean for that milestone when we do transition them beyond high school: the goal of sending faithful kids out into the world.

Merton Strommen and Richard Hardel in their book *Passing on the Faith* agree with the needed perspective shift and declare, “A faith-formation paradigm limited to religious instruction for children and a youth group for high school students no longer equips one generation to effectively pass on the faith to the next generation. A paradigm shift is needed – and that results in a more comprehensive approach to foster faith through experiences in the family, the congregation, the community, and the culture.”<sup>4</sup>

As each congregation rallies around such a picture of partnership, we’ll be amazed to see that the struggles that have led us to this crisis can also experience a drastic

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<sup>1</sup> Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 210.

<sup>2</sup> Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 2577-85.

<sup>3</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 2578.

<sup>4</sup> Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2000), 19.

perspective shift. Community can be found in the midst of our congregations, and our churches can demonstrate their commitment to setting up an environment where partnership is nurtured and mutually beneficial for all involved. Churches can become places that properly support our grads in a way that is transformational, no longer stuck in a rut of the “same old same old.” Parents as well can then be empowered about the aim of their own roles in the life of their student. Youth ministry programs themselves can also be given a tighter focus as they form a vision that includes creating constellations of support.

In this chapter, I am proposing two particular projects to be carried out in my congregational setting to help such a vital shift occur. First, casting a church-wide ministry vision that seeks to connect the dots in community will be instituted and explored. As we have seen in countless ways, strong faith grows best and sticks best when it is shaped by a fully invested and supportive environment, a community that is itself connecting the dots. Second, a youth ministry based program to prepare our grads for their ongoing faith ownership will be developed – called a “Grad Prep Program.” Research tools specific to both of these efforts in my ministry context will be executed to discern both the positive ways that we are seeking change, as well as to highlight areas for improvement. Finally, a reflection on some of the initial communications of the overall “Connecting the Dots in Community” project will be conducted.

#### **A Ministry Vision that Seeks to Connect the Dots in Community**

“Too often, even the most compelling vision is thwarted because, in spite of all the right structures being in place, little to no attention has been given to the climate. Like working in a building that’s structurally sound but filled with noxious gases, these youth ministries may have a fine, well-structured vision. But the climate is toxic, preventing sustainable change from ever taking hold.”

– Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*

I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back. So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it. (Philippians 3:12-16, The Message)

The only kind of ministry vision that has the power to create lasting change in a congregation and among our church family systems must take into account everything that DeVries highlights. Not only need there be a compelling articulation of vision and the right structures in place to execute the vision, there must *also be* a great deal of attention given to the climate of the overall church to insure that healthy ministry shifts can emerge. But like healthy plants that grow out of healthy soil, we must recognize that the environment itself is a major factor to be considered and maximized. As vision and structure and climate are all pondered, our overall ministry focus can move us toward racing toward our goal.

Paul's great encouragement for his young believing friends to run the race of faith speaks so powerfully about the importance and necessity of single-minded vision. He was passionate about reaching out to Christ as a heart response since he was so changed by a God who first reached out to him! Without having everything figured out, Paul kept the focus on our goal of a closer walk with Jesus. In the same way, we are called to total commitment, to get on the right track and stay on the right track together. We can reach out for Christ as a heart response as we are changed by a God who has first reached out to

each of us! This is one vital aspect of the vision of a truly committed congregation: the picture of a personally-owned love relationship with Jesus Christ.

Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls! (Hebrews 12:1-3, *The Message*)

A complementary passage of running the race is found in the Book of Hebrews.

Here the author reiterates the difference that a determined focus makes in running toward Jesus with all of our hearts. We actually learn how to best follow after Jesus by emulating the model of his life and trust in God, especially in the face of suffering. We know that staying firm in our commitment to Christ can become difficult and our faith can flag at times, but God wants to use our community to nudge us onward. The second aspect of such a vision as relates to a steadfast community of believers: we have veterans who surround us and cheer us on and *run with us* as we follow Jesus together.

We've seen throughout this paper the problem of many of this generation who let their flagging faith fail and fall away. Our young people often have difficulty describing any true relationships or connections with adults outside of their family. And they struggle to clearly articulate about the importance of their personal faith as well. Culturally, we have so abandoned and isolated this generation – even within the church – that it is no small wonder that they are lacking the very relationships that could help them grow and mature.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 36.

Scripture points to much more! And the best ministry thinkers of our day also illustrate the potential of so much more. But what does it look like to try to put it all into practice, to run such a race of faith together? It takes a great investment to connect relationally throughout a congregation and set a pattern of faith-shaping community that is a sort of “immersion program” for students to grow up in – and then be trained to create that community for themselves in their next phase of life. As Mark DeVries writes, “Whatever new models for youth ministry we develop must take seriously the fact that teenagers grow toward mature Christian adulthood as they are connected to the total body of Christ, not isolated from it.”<sup>6</sup>

In my ministry setting, this is my proposed approach: The overall ministry vision must always ask, “Are we connecting the dots in community?” This means the vision must be articulated and owned throughout the entire congregation. It cannot just be some ancillary programmatic afterthought, but rather a vital value with which every active adult engages and invests in as well. These adults will know that they too need to be connecting the dots in community for their relationship with Jesus to be fully lived out and experienced as part and parcel of the congregation’s culture. Especially across the different age groups, true *koinonia* can be made more concrete, but it must be intentional.

Hear this challenge from Mark DeVries:

Any approach to youth ministry in the new millennium must move beyond a myopic focus on programming and “relational ministry” done by a few enthusiastic, inexperienced, short-term, early-twenties youth leaders who stay around only long enough to “wow” our kids. Unless our new models of ministry can help our culture restore the “generational threads that used to weave their way into the fabric of growing up,” our ministries will be severely limited in their long-term effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 43-44.

<sup>7</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 56.



Ask any pastor who is fed up with watching short-term-spiritual-mountaintop experiences come and go like the wind. Long-term work is what we want to be about and it happens as a church puts a stake in the ground around its own commitment to live the vision of truly being a Christian community; this calls individuals to deep faith ownership together.

This is how Jim Burns describes the vision of connectedness:

The unfortunate fact today is that statistically, a sense of community is something students rarely encounter. From broken families to busy lives, students are starved for a sense of community and belonging. As they encounter a community that is seeking the face of God, they will naturally be drawn to it. They desire connectedness—not only to others but also to something (or someone) greater than themselves.<sup>8</sup>

“Connectedness.” This is at the heart of this thesis project. Truly connecting the dots in community is all about creating the environment that feeds this vision and lifts our eyes to the higher goal of seeing kids stick with their faith for many years to come. All of our efforts and investments for the *now* pale in comparison to the joy and satisfaction of seeing faithful ministry help our students continue to grow in their relationship with Jesus and the people of Jesus years down the road. This kind of vision is all about training them up to be followers of Jesus for life. It’s what Jim Burns calls “the bottom line of ministry!”<sup>9</sup>

To reflect further on what is needed from this vision, the following charts our course on this race. This ministry vision must be congregationally-driven – embraced from the top down at every level of leadership with a far reaching invitation for all to participate in the details of the vision. Once this vision is sufficiently and consistently embraced and reaffirmed in our congregations, the setting is then ripe for a specific

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<sup>8</sup> Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 98.

<sup>9</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 114.

holistically-designed Grad Prep Program that puts the vision of connecting the dots into practice for our students getting ready to graduate.

### **Embraces a Congregationally-Driven Vision**

“Very early in my ministry, I remember hearing these words: “A task without a vision is nothing but drudgery; a vision without a task is nothing but dreaming; but a vision with a task is a missionary.” It’s a truth that touches the very heart of effective youth ministry... The difference between youth-work-as-chaperone (keeping the order) and youth-work-as-shepherd (keeping the sheep) is vision. Vision is absolutely essential if we want to stay fresh and enthusiastic about youth ministry over the long haul.”

– Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples*

Meanwhile, live in such a way that you are a credit to the Message of Christ. Let nothing in your conduct hang on whether I come or not. Your conduct must be the same whether I show up to see things for myself or hear of it from a distance. Stand united, singular in vision, contending for people’s trust in the Message, the good news, not flinching or dodging in the slightest before the opposition. (Philippians 1:27, 28, The Message)

Environment is everything. When it comes to *growing* healthy things – crops, kids, and even ministry – environment is everything. Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church, says, “The task of church leadership is to discover and remove growth-restricting diseases and barriers so that natural, normal growth can occur.”<sup>10</sup> So whether it is the approach of the *Exemplary Youth Ministry* project or *Sticky Faith* or *Think Orange*, church leadership must remember that the locale of ministry to our youth (our individual churches and families and youth ministries) has a profound impact on the spiritual location of our kids and the eventual direction to which this faith will lead them. Thus, the “spirit and the culture” of individual congregations are immensely powerful in helping to form lasting faith in its children as they mature. This is why we must reaffirm that a congregationally-driven vision is essential, because the task of nurturing long-term

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<sup>10</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 16.

faith is not just a youth ministry concern, it must be a concern of the entire congregation. Responding to the problem presented at the outset of this paper – students losing faith after high school – Wayne Rice reminds us that this truly is a congregational-level predicament. Rice expands, “But what we have today is not really a youth ministry problem. It’s a church problem. Truth is it has always been a church problem.”<sup>11</sup>

In our churches, it’s our task to call everyone, young and old, into a loving and abundant-life giving relationship with Jesus Christ. Sometimes, however, we fall short of giving a fuller picture of what this ongoing relationship – and what our personal investment and ownership of this relationship – truly looks like. Like every relationship, it is made up of both defining moments and the process of becoming close in a daily way as well. It is important that we help people see their faith journey as the grand story it is – and even give them a way to speak meaningfully about the ownership of their journey.<sup>12</sup> If we focus too much on the moment of our conversion, for instance, and then not discuss what it means to continue to grow in that relationship, that is like telling someone that marriage is only all about the wedding day. What an incomplete picture! Our picture of faith ownership also needs to include the continued encouragement of significant friendships in our community of faith, as we have extensively covered in this thesis.

Obviously, relationships matter! And any solution to the problem of allowing our students to slip away from their faith must be thoroughly relational in our approach in every aspect. At its core, this project revolves around the word “connections” – a theme

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<sup>11</sup> Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), Kindle locations 1456-58.

<sup>12</sup> Gordon T. Smith, *Transforming Conversion* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), Kindle locations 176-78.

that is repeated over and over again in key documents and resources we've been exploring. Jim Burns says:

The degree to which students will stay in the church, get involved and make significant life decisions for Christ is directly dependent on their sense of belonging to the community. If they connect significantly with peers and adult leaders, teenagers are more likely to stay in the church. Spiritual impact is the same. It's been said that students are not theologically aware until they are sociologically comfortable.<sup>13</sup>

With a congregationally-driven vision, several key initiatives create the fertile setting to help faith stick. First, this vision would communicate and inspire a church-wide commitment to prepare students to keep their faith. Second, the vision would strategically meet the acute need for connections that matter for all in the congregation, making *koinonia* a reality in its midst. Third, the vision would set up practical experiences of intergenerational fellowship in intentional ways. Fourth, the vision itself would be propelled by a team-based approach to include the entire staff (especially the Senior Pastor), key stakeholders in the wider church leadership structure, parents and families, leaders in the youth ministry, and the students themselves.

Investment of this sort in a church-wide vision needs to start from and be led by the senior pastor (as seen in both the EYM and NSYR studies). Focusing on the fact that the articulation of this investment is essential in setting the context for helping faith stick for our young must be central to vision, and remember, the role of the lead pastor in this process is essential.<sup>14</sup> The language of partnership should be pervasive in all communications as well – we are better together! The constant message needs to be that our young people are fully regarded as part of the church of today and not just tomorrow.

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<sup>13</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 75.

<sup>14</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle location 174.

This calls for reciprocal visibility – meaning adults need to visit youth settings as well as youth being present in adult settings. This kind of mutuality is essential to truly demonstrate commitment.

Since the wider church needs to shift its perspective, new questions should be asked to help all think outside of the box about the interactions of adults and students in the congregation. “Where do we mix as people of different age groups?” should be a frequent inquiry during congregational planning – and venues to make this kind of ministry happen should be a priority. While this is not simply about just adding the words “intergenerational” to other ministries, this is a good place to start. Intergenerational service teams, intergenerational worship bands, bell choirs, committee and team meetings that don’t drive kids (and really adults) crazy. We must be sensitive to the generational differences and preferences that do come up, but perhaps there is more common ground among the generations than we’ve often considered. Overall commitment of this kind would show an increase in clarity about how community life, family faith, and the inspiration of long term faith ownership fit into the mission of the congregation as a whole.

It really comes down to the key question of value. Many a church has an “aspired” value of saying that youth ministry is important, but it is only really lip-service as true support is hampered by lack of investment – either by failing to provide the resources (financial, volunteers, energy, and airtime) – to youth ministry. David Olshine writes:

We need leaders who value children and youth ministry. The good news is that most senior (lead) pastors have influence to make things happen in their local context. Lead pastors can support and inspire their congregation to have a vision

for youth ministry, and this can trickle down to finances and budgets being aligned with the needs of youth and family ministry.<sup>15</sup>

It is true that it has been concluded that the spiritual influence of the lead pastor on students in our churches ranks higher than youth pastors, so we must pay attention to the importance of vision casting and ownership from the top down.<sup>16</sup> This is also emphasized in the work of the EYM study team.<sup>17</sup>

In shaping and sharing this vision, relational engagement is the key! Christian Smith does a tremendous amount of crystallizing these issues around the word “engagement.”<sup>18</sup> At its core, healthy engagement is established by a healthy attitude toward teens. Adults in congregations need to see adolescents as people with whom they can connect and share life – and recognize that they will be blessed as well. Smith goes so far as to challenge in his summary that “adults of all sorts in religious communities should be taught to stop thinking about teenagers as aliens or others” and start meeting them face to face as brothers and sisters in Christ.<sup>19</sup> Better engagement could come through a variety of ways which we will explore in this section.

Smith suggests getting parents more involved altogether and having churches be more intentional about specific teaching practices so that students can better articulate their faith.<sup>20</sup> Smith even goes so far as to “tap into teens’ strong inclination toward individualism” to challenge them to make faith ownership more of a priority issue in their

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<sup>15</sup> David Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), Kindle locations 580-87.

<sup>16</sup> Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again*, Kindle location 1504.

<sup>17</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle location 173.

<sup>18</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle locations 5796-5804.

<sup>19</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 5912-13.

<sup>20</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 5803-33.

lives, but to do this in a non-obnoxious and respectful way.<sup>21</sup> Principally, though, the powerful and extraordinary prescription that Smith encourages churches to utilize in better engaging connections in church is to discover “simple, ordinary adult relationships with teenagers.”<sup>22</sup>

Thinking structurally, this vision would be assisted by looking at the overlapping arenas of ministry and being intentional in creating synergy among them. There are several different ways to consider this overlap, but all of the various combinations of factors simply drive home the fact that there is a great deal of complexity that must be considered in addressing these issues.

*Passing on the Faith* research shows that when there is harmony in these “three caring environments – home, school, and church – 53 percent (of youth) gave evidence of a mature faith. These statistics clearly suggest that the more caring environments an adolescent experiences, the more he or she will grow in faith.”<sup>23</sup> Imagine what could happen if we took seriously being a light for our young people in all three environments. Certainly, our overall ministry philosophy could and should lead us to specific strategies for support within our church culture and ministry programs, as well as plans for family faith development. Beyond this, we could also find ways to volunteer and make an impact for our young people within the schools of our community, where there are many hurts and needs.

Another approach to overlaps was suggested in *The Family-Friendly Church* by Ben Freudenberg and Rick Lawrence. They point to a power of being intentional in

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<sup>21</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 5833-44.

<sup>22</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 5863.

<sup>23</sup> Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 66.

communicating a vision of partnership in three ministry areas: the age-specific arena, the intergenerational arena, and the home arena.<sup>24</sup> When a congregation works hard to coordinate in such a way, ministry efforts are amplified in powerful ways. As previously discussed, this kind of synergy was highlighted in *Think Orange* as well.

The overlaps discussed in the Exemplary Youth Ministry project are telling as well. They list four spheres, and challenge churches to concentrate on the strengths and weaknesses in each of these arenas: congregational life & ministries, youth ministry, family faith, and congregational leadership.<sup>25</sup> The authors of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* state, “Congregational culture is more than the sum of what people bring with them and more than a mirror image of the theological tradition they represent. It is a unique creation, constructed out of their interaction together over time.”<sup>26</sup>

“*More than the sum...*” The environments that we have at our disposal in our churches are right before us. And we have the opportunity to powerfully grow a crop of strong faithful kids. As seen in the *EYM* model, ministry becomes complementary in a variety of ways as a church demonstrates its dedication to the faith of its young people.<sup>27</sup> Again we are reminded by the authors of *Spirit and Culture* that if this level of commitment across the board isn’t given, “youth and youth ministry will always be tangential and second rate” at best.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Freudenburg and Lawrence, *The Family-Friendly Church*, Kindle location 1284-85.

<sup>25</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle location 1075.

<sup>26</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1003-05.

<sup>27</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1064-75

<sup>28</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle location 1139.



### **Inspires a Commitment to Prepare Students**

These models (of constructing a vision for ministry as a first step to include and involve everyone in the lives of our young people) demonstrate the commitment that is being made for the faith formation of all. A key next step in the process then becomes making a priority the widespread and effective communication of this commitment to prepare students by being engaged in the lives of students. And not only does this commitment need to be a stated or aspired value, it needs to be accompanied by tangible steps for the participation of “your average Joe pew sitter!” I remember presenting at a luncheon for our senior adults at our church and talking about this kind of intergenerational vision when one of the older gentleman kindly raised his hand. “I agree that all of this is important. Now tell me *how* to connect with kids these days! Give me five examples of ways that we can do this.” Wow! Of course, without practical options for people in our congregations to sink their teeth into, this vision will just remain a slogan without impact.

Going beyond just communicating, “Young people, we are here for you!” means that concrete actions and avenues for interactions need to be established. My response to this older gentleman went something like this: “You can get involved by believing that young people *want* a relationship with the older generation in the congregation, even if their outward demeanor doesn’t show that. You can become personally connected to a student through our prayer partner program. You can make it a goal to learn the names of students at Sunday morning services and then make sure that you approach them at a later date and remember their names. Talk to me about coming into their world and visit on a youth group night or a Sunday school class and share about your faith in Jesus. You can show up with cookies for the last ten minutes of youth group and visit with students while

they eat your masterpieces. You can hire a kiddo if you need yard work done and then ask about her story while she weeds your garden. Overall, just keep up what you are doing by challenging me to make these avenues specific and doable...and then show up!”

I’ve found that telling stories of the power of intergenerational connections must be an ongoing element of inspiring a congregational commitment to make such connections happen. And these stories really need to come from the mouths of both the students and the elders of the congregation, not just through church staff. There have been several occasions where some of our students off at college have responded to the gifts and notes that we send out in care packages to our graduates. Even recently, one student who was marginally active in our ministry while in high school wrote, “Hey Chris I meant to thank you for the package you guys sent me a few days ago. It came right during the most stressful midterms and really helped me push through. The book was great! And all the messages were so amazing. I’ll see you guys soon, thanks again man.” The book that the student is referring to was a devotional book given by a 90 year old man in our congregation who thought that our young adults could really use the encouragement of such a resource. Obviously, this elder was right! Not only did he donate 25 copies to our grads, he also included a hand-written note that warned the students about “staying away from drug dealers” and remembering that God is always there for them! What a saint! He believed in the vision we communicated that we wanted our older generation to invest in the lives of our students and he found a way to do so! (More of these practical ministry ideas will be explored in chapter five.)

And fuel is really added to the fire of this kind of inspiration when we hear from our graduates themselves about how their time in the midst of our church families has

helped set the course for their ongoing growth in their relationship with Jesus, especially as they find ways to love and serve the world. Mission experiences in college (and beyond) are prime examples of how our congregations can still make tangible investments – both in prayer and financial support – for the next generation to literally be the hands and feet of Jesus.

### **Strategically Meets the Acute Need for Connections that Matter**

As we invent ways for our vision to be lived out practically, we are truly meeting the needs for connections (on all sides of the equation) by being strategic about those relationships. I recently had coffee with an older couple in our congregation who has been trying to be an avenue of God’s love to some of our students by serving as prayer partners. They believe in the power of connections. They are great initiators in their friendships with our students and they are faithful in their support and prayers for our kids. But this day, they were definitely feeling insecure about the best ways to make such connections with their partners! My friend talked about how far this experience took him out of his comfort zone, like he was “traveling in a foreign land” when it came to understanding and relating to his teenage friend. I believe that the responsibility is on us as church workers to honestly communicate that relating to teens is sometimes exactly that – feeling like you have left home and are visiting a far-off country. In many ways, then, we serve as “tour guides” for distant lands! We can point out some of the aspects of the culture of teens that would be helpful, give some essential direction about “do’s and don’ts” while you travel abroad, and remind them that the real joy in traveling is to experience something that is very different from your everyday life!

Several practical steps could go a long way in helping the adults of our congregation feel more confident in their role in making connections. In our setting, we've developed a "prayer partner job description" to help clarify expectations for our adults – and to remind them to have realistic expectations of the adolescents they are working with. Additional tools and training are needed for the adults who want to take seriously the task of "being family" and encouraging these connections to go deep.

So a key question remains for our churches: "Will our adults step up to this need?" Mark DeVries shares the crisis point of the moment: "Emotionally available neighbors, grandparents, teachers or coaches are quickly moving to the endangered species list, as the pace of life topples over itself and the number of children who need care vastly outpaces the number of adults who choose to be available to them."<sup>29</sup> Many people know that relationships matter and that networks of support are essential. In a clearly articulated vision with definitive suggestions, the members of our churches can find ways to be equipped and encouraged to boldly be available *and* able to connect the dots in community.

Such a "spiritual safety net" isn't just a program, it is a mindset that grows out of a vision for truly being the people of Jesus doing *koinonia* together, creating a family, a group of people doing life together. When this happens, lives are changed. In one study, parents were asked, "How does the church help you with your strengths or challenges?" the overwhelming response of parents was, "By being a network of people who care."<sup>30</sup>

And we need to make such opportunities practical and concrete for both our adults and our students so that practical experiences of intergenerational fellowship isn't

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<sup>29</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 66.

some unattainable idea, but simply part of “what we do” as a church family so that students are someday surprised to discover that their cross-generational connections are truly a rare commodity in this world.

### **Experiments with Practical Experiences of Intergenerational Fellowship**

While there is much more that could be explored regarding the myriad possible ideas regarding intergenerational fellowship, bigger than the ideas themselves must be the commitment to do *something* to help bridge the generations in our congregations. Once the commitment is there, the fun really starts! Just like the gentleman at our senior adult luncheon, people want specific details about what might be expected of them so that they can start to visualize the reality of becoming involved in such a venture. While the following list is far from exhaustive, here are some of the practical experiences that we are experimenting with in my ministry context.

Our prayer partner program has been one of the key initiatives to make generational mixing a reality. We ask adults to specifically “adopt” a student prayer partner for the school year with the primary goal of praying for them daily. We give each prayer partner a “job description” to clearly indicate the expectations of their service as a prayer partner. We articulate that their adults are not called to be some kind of “super-Christian” or “mighty-person-of-prayer,” rather just a regular person who is growing in his or her relationship with Christ and cares about kids! We give the prayer partner pictures and contact information for our student, including birthday info, so that the adults can make contact with the student as they feel led by God (and their own comfort level). We have quarterly “open house” times for the partners to connect and share mutual prayer concerns, as well as hear each other’s stories. We are doing our best to

help the adults understand a bit about youth culture so that they can confidently take initiative with the students, regardless of the “perceived interest” (or lack thereof!) of the student. Since these adults are consistently connecting with students, we have them participate in our church’s background check process.

One significant adjustment to our prayer partner program we have instituted relates to asking the prayer partners of seniors in high school to continue on for one more year after their student graduates (again, a *Sticky Faith* idea).<sup>31</sup> I was so delighted when a seventy-year old grandma came into my office shortly after Valentine’s Day to tell me that her college prayer partner had sent *her* a card for the holiday. With tears in her eyes, that senior adult *thanked me* and our youth ministry for helping these kinds of connections to happen. (As a beautiful follow-up, this college student recently told me about a coffee date between her and her prayer partner. She described their time together in one word: “magical!”)

We also get the wider congregation involved in participating in sending off care packages to our students away at college or in the military. In addition to some folks bringing fresh baked goods, we have also used our fellowship hour time to encourage adults in the congregations to write individual notes to the students. It’s amazing to hear the response from the college kids. Overall, there is a great sense of awe: “*You are thinking of me!*” What a powerful message to constantly communicate. (I shared stories about this ministry earlier!)

Rather than trying to create new events to mingle the generations, we’ve tried to simply tweak existing events to make them more intentionally intergenerational.<sup>32</sup> We’ve

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<sup>31</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 988-99.

<sup>32</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle location 2081.

also starting raising the bar of expectations for the students themselves to step out of their comfort zones and show gratitude for the tremendous ways that the adults of our church support our youth ministry. Aside from worship services, we've tried to make the most of opportunities (fundraiser dinners, church picnics, etc.) to challenge the students to practice initiating with the adults of the church. A key aspect of creating mentoring relationships of support in the future is the ability of the young person to do this well as she matures.

All of these avenues for practical experiences of intergenerational fellowship are vehicles for the building of faithful friendships! These “moments of mixing” end up being about much more than the moment itself, but rather a setting for connections to happen. It's a real-life example of what Paul wrote about in the book of Romans. “I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong— that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith” (Romans 1:11, 12, NIV). It strikes me that Paul, the “super apostle,” was honest enough to state that he needed encouragement too! We all do; so let's be about the business of creating environments for such encouragement to happen well. Just to illustrate, here's a note I recently received from Brooke (whom I wrote about in the opening chapter), who writes:

This quarter has been really difficult for me. Actually my first year of college has been the most challenging year of my life! There were so many dynamics going on that I felt like I was being spiritually attacked from every angle. As my last ditch attempt (which really should have been my first idea!) I sent out a message asking for prayer. I sent it to anyone who was Christian and I felt close enough to that they would pray for me without judgment. I had sent the prayer request to 54 people when I was done – people from my home church and my new church, mentors and friends. I had no idea just how large my constellation of support was! I felt confident and comfortable going to 54 people for prayer... That is an amazing support system that stemmed from Longview Community Church! Even

when I don't ask for prayer, I know leaders from my home church are still praying for me. What an amazing thing to be thankful for!<sup>33</sup>

It is indeed amazing to have such a support system in place – and more amazing still that such a young person would be bold enough to initiate with her network and ask for prayer. Amazing!

Certainly we need to continue to give such resources and tools to both adults in the congregations and the students themselves so that these avenues can happen. But it all starts with an overarching congregational vision to see this kind of connecting happen – with the great expectation that it will lead to a more durable faith for our youth. As

Gordon Smith writes:

If a child is going to appropriate an adult faith, the most vital need is older women and men who are present to that young person, demonstrating generosity and hope through blessing and encouragement. It is a nonjudgmental presence that is thoroughly present without being an unwelcome burden, a presence that allows God to do God's work in God's time in the life of the child and the young person.<sup>34</sup>

What a great reminder that it is in and through such connections that God does his best work and Jesus is incarnationally present.<sup>35</sup> And this kind of work of God has such long lasting effects, both for the student and the adult! The truth is many of our adults are struggling with loneliness and their own internal issues. As the people of Jesus exercise their ability to do community led by Jesus in faithful connections, that “mutual encouragement” Paul wrote about in Romans becomes a tangible reality.

It is amazing to see how connecting deeply like this can help everyone light up! I've especially been blessed lately to see the senior adults so surprised when our students

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<sup>33</sup> Noelle Bosch, email message to author, May 26, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *Transforming Conversion*, Kindle locations 3848-55.

<sup>35</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 97.



make the effort. Recently, we took tulips on Mother's day weekend to some of the shut-in grandmas of our congregation. A small team of us just showed up unannounced with lovely flowers and smiles. Oh, the grateful embraces we received! The very next day, this note came from one of our grandmas (who had just recently lost her husband):

“Thank you for the beautiful tulips and the love you brought to me. At this time in my life, hugs are so welcome and needed and I feel the love of Jesus through you. It was a joy to welcome you into my home....PS: Please forgive me if I don't remember all of your names, but I will always remember what you did for me.”<sup>36</sup>

Such a small act of kindness led to such a huge sense of blessing. And the greater goal ultimately becomes a byproduct of a healthy, connected church: Faith inspired and owned and practiced and experienced in the midst of community for both our young people and our adults too!

### **Communicates a Team-Based Approach**

The last key aspect that a congregation should consider as essential to their vision of creating the best environment for faith to grow for their children and stick as their children mature relates to this non-negotiable: It take a team-based approach to create this kind of culture in a congregation. It must be communicated in a variety of ways and repeatedly that partnership between parish and parents, old and young, programs and staff and general congregational members – “This will take ALL of us...Together is better!” This attitude really must begin with a level of commitment among the paid staff to knock down any barriers that lead to fracturing and prioritizing of individual ministries over the health of all. Staff leadership must be *sold out* to this level of hard work. It takes constant attention to remain a healthy team and keep the overall mission to church family – and individual families – as the priority.

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<sup>36</sup> Marion Griffith, note to the author, Thursday, May 13, 2015

In my own experience, I know that youth ministry and children's ministry are very different animals. And if I am totally honest, there are times I have thought of children's ministry (at best) as a feeder program to my ministry. And (at worst), I have thought of children's ministry as glorified babysitting. Obviously, I don't believe that theologically or developmentally, and I am tremendously grateful for the ways that my own children have been blessed and nurtured in our children's programs. But I know there is much I need to repent of, because without commitment across the board to see and imagine what complete commitment to our team and our united mission, any and all efforts at a "family ministry" model will be hampered.

As staff unites, a core of key adult leaders and parents within the church must see themselves as participating and creative members of such a family ministry team. Consistent messaging about the overall vision should become memorized and applied. Key resources should be made available in a multitude of different ways so that people in different corners of the church can see themselves as part of the solution. Especially for parents, this means offering seminars and making space for faith conversations, or giving out books or website (some in full form, but most often in bite-sized portions) so that they can feel like tools are being added to their parenting tool box. In every possible way, the language of partnership should prevail and be prominent.

It is the sad truth that often the parents in our youth ministries are thought of as secondary, or even as antagonists to healthy ministry. This must change and it can best shift as we utilize the language of team. With such a team-based approach, however, family faith is no longer on the edges of our ministry plan, but it is at the core. Doug Fields speaks to the vital need to include parents in our youth ministry: "because a youth

ministry that excludes parents is about as effective as a Band-Aid on a hemorrhage.”<sup>37</sup>

David Olshine continues this angle, “But from my perspective, one of the most troubling issues in American youth ministry is our current approach of not partnering and empowering the parents of youth. I believe this silent but enormous elephant in the room can no longer be ignored.”<sup>38</sup> This shortcoming of many youth groups has even been called “parent-noia” – a “deep-seated fear and anxiety of parents.”<sup>39</sup>

We have the chance to do quite the opposite. As a team, we must invite parents to step into their own responsibility to form faith. We must clearly state that no one is on their own. Dolores Curan says, “We need to gather together the impressive data showing that the parent is the primary determinant of a person’s faith, and present it over and over in every way possible until we convince parents of its validity. Until we do so, parents will continue to visualize themselves as adjuncts to the faith process. Adjuncts do not necessarily become responsible.”<sup>40</sup> But on a team, everyone sees that they have a part to play, to be *both* responsible and able to respond!

If a team approach to nurture family faith can be adopted, much good can come from this aspect of the solution. Children’s ministry can be seen for what it really is, not just a “feeder” system into youth programs, but instead a full partner in accomplishing holistic family ministry. David Olshine declares, “Children’s and youth ministry is like a relay team.”<sup>41</sup> For anyone familiar with relays in track and field, the race is won or lost with the handoff of the baton. To illustrate this truth, consider this story. In the 2008

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<sup>37</sup> Doug Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), Kindle locations 3394-98.

<sup>38</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong*, Kindle locations 184-88.

<sup>39</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong*, Kindle locations 189-90.

<sup>40</sup> Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong*, Kindle locations 597-602.

Olympics in Beijing, both the U. S. men's and women's 4x100 relays dropped the baton pass in the preliminary races and failed to even qualify for a shot at a medal. Imagine this reality: The United States had four incredibly fast men and four ridiculously fast women on their teams – perhaps 8 of the fastest 30 people in the world – but it didn't matter because they failed as a team. They dropped the baton!<sup>42</sup>

And as people find ways to engage in being part of the team, their sense of involvement increases. In whatever ways we choose to form and build such a team-mindset, we should do our best to give opportunities for individual students and adults to craft their own involvement in a way that fits their personality and interests. It is a key leadership truth that people own what they help to create, so we need to allow for flexibility and creativity to be important in our team building. And this in turn would then lead to our students themselves owning what they create in their own faith. DeVries builds on this imagery:

We need to be architecting a constellation of relationships around kids so they've got six or eight adults—the parent passes on the baton so the kid knows what it's like to be a part of a lifelong faith community. The phrase I like is “stacking the stands”—using that picture from Hebrews 12. We want to stack the arena so that when our kids leave our ministry they sense the stands are filled with 10 to 20 to 50 adults who are cheering for them. That doesn't just happen naturally.<sup>43</sup>

If a team is going to happen, it needs to be intentional. As David Olshine points out, several vital outcomes occur when team ministry happens well: Vision is aligned as ministries get on the same page at the same pace, unity is present, programming

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<sup>42</sup> Sam Borden. “For U.S. Relayers, Dread of Another Dropped Baton,” NY Times, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/sports/olympics/olympics-2012-us-track-relays-hope-to-avoid-another-baton-drop.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/07/23/sports/olympics/olympics-2012-us-track-relays-hope-to-avoid-another-baton-drop.html?_r=0), (accessed May 25, 2015).

<sup>43</sup> Doug Fields. “Q&A with Doug Fields: Mark DeVries on Partnering with Parents,” Group Magazine, July-August, 2008. <http://archive.youthministry.com/details.asp?ID=6612>, (accessed May 25, 2015).

continuity is sharpened, and strategies are utilized to better help transition students as they grow up in the church.<sup>44</sup>

Support for a team based family-faith program is more than just providing curriculum or resources. It is recognizing that much in our society is stretching and stressing our families and we are committed to walk beside these parents to bring real-life support as they encourage their children in all aspects of life, not just their faith.<sup>45</sup> The authors of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* condense it well: “At its best youth ministry is a team effort...(so emphasize) the power of involving the entire congregation with its variety of people, relationships, and practices in ministry with youth.”<sup>46</sup>

Wayne Cordeiro of New Hope Community Church succinctly calls such partnership “doing church as a team.” He passionately communicates, “Doing church as a team is merely a return to the way God designed the church to function. The ministry of the church is not the responsibility of a few professionals; it is the divine responsibility of every one of us.”<sup>47</sup> Part of our calling, then, is to see the great need that is present in our church as kids continue to lose their faith and realize that each one of us has a role to play, as a member of the team, to get into the game and see change happen!

### **A Holistically-Designed Program – The Grad Prep Program**

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.  
(Philippians 3:12-14, NIV)

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<sup>44</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong*, Kindle locations 643-649.

<sup>45</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 45-46.

<sup>46</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3990-94.

<sup>47</sup> Wayne Cordeiro, *Doing Church as a Team* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2004), 37.

“If the critical years are about anything, though, they are about honing in on the central convictions of your life. What do you really believe? Why do you believe what you believe? Have you taken ownership of your faith?”

– Derek Melleby, *Make College Count*

Now that the fertile ground has been prepared in our vision-driven congregation for nurturing long-lasting faith in our children, it is time to plant something! In an effort to explore a holistically designed program for equipping our graduates to keep their faith after graduation, several key discussions must occur. First, this Grad Prep Program must be complementary to the entire structure of the youth ministry and really be seen as a “launching pad” kind of effort as students transition into adulthood. Second, a specific plan must be crafted to train students to create their own constellations of Christian support after they graduate by grasping the essential nature of such a spiritual safety net while they are in their home congregation. Third, additional attempts at assisting students to properly practice faith ownership before graduation will require ways to establish a curriculum of equipping. Fourth, ongoing encouragement from “home base” will be provided through congregation wide endeavors. With such a holistic-design, the framework itself of the Grad Prep Program will then be proposed.

#### **Complimentary to the Entire Structure of Youth Ministry**

“God loves you just the way you are, but he refuses to leave you that way.”

– Max Lucado, *Just Like Jesus*

Truly the most effective book that has guided my overall philosophy of youth ministry has been *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry (PDYM)* by Doug Fields. His approach of striving for ministry health established on core biblical purposes that are then consistently communicated through statements of mission, vision, and values provides a blueprint for how to get everyone on the same page toward an exciting direction for

youth ministry.<sup>48</sup> Fields sets the right pattern for ministry programs and ideas to flow out of an intentional groundwork that also considers the spiritual commitment level of the students being reached and then plotting a process for them to make next steps.

Having a mission statement, vision statement, statement of core values, and a spiritual formation process that all makes sense together is essential to be able to then determine how programs and events appropriately grow out of the foundation of your ministry. Throughout my work with *PDYM* and other resources, I have also seen the power of a clear articulation of key statements that communicate the heart and focus of youth ministry in a specific congregational setting. Andy Stanley emphasizes that such an effort to clarify mission keeps ministry properly aligned.<sup>49</sup> Duffy Robbins portrays the mission as the “why” the ministry exists in the first place as a key part of a youth ministry philosophy.<sup>50</sup> Countless other examples could be listed that all point to the same conclusion: key statements of mission and vision matter! And this is really setting the stage as the platform for a Grad Prep Program.

One of the most helpful personal discoveries that evolved for me as I read *PDYM* relates to a personalization of a model of “spiritual journey” that helps students discover for themselves where they are on their spiritual journey and reflect on practical next steps to be considered. Fields reflects on just such a tool by writing, “Process enables students to see where they are in your ministry’s spiritual growth plan. A process may be

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<sup>48</sup> Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 347-53.

<sup>49</sup> Andy Stanley and Stuart Hall, *The Seven Checkpoints for Student Leaders* (New York: Howard Books, 2011), 212.

<sup>50</sup> Duffy Robbins, *Youth Ministry Nuts and Bolts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 91.

diagrammed as a funnel, a baseball diamond, a pyramid, or anything else that acts as a framework for the purposes and programs.”<sup>51</sup>

### **Helping Students Discover Themselves on the Journey of Faith**

We call our model of the spiritual journey “the swirl” and it is a bit of a combination of several other models. First, it begins by describing different types of “audiences” where students locate themselves related to their self-assessed level of commitment to the personal ownership of their faith and their sense of connection to a Christian community. I borrow heavily from the audience image in PDYM as a starting place. Fields highlights why this audience model is helpful. He writes:

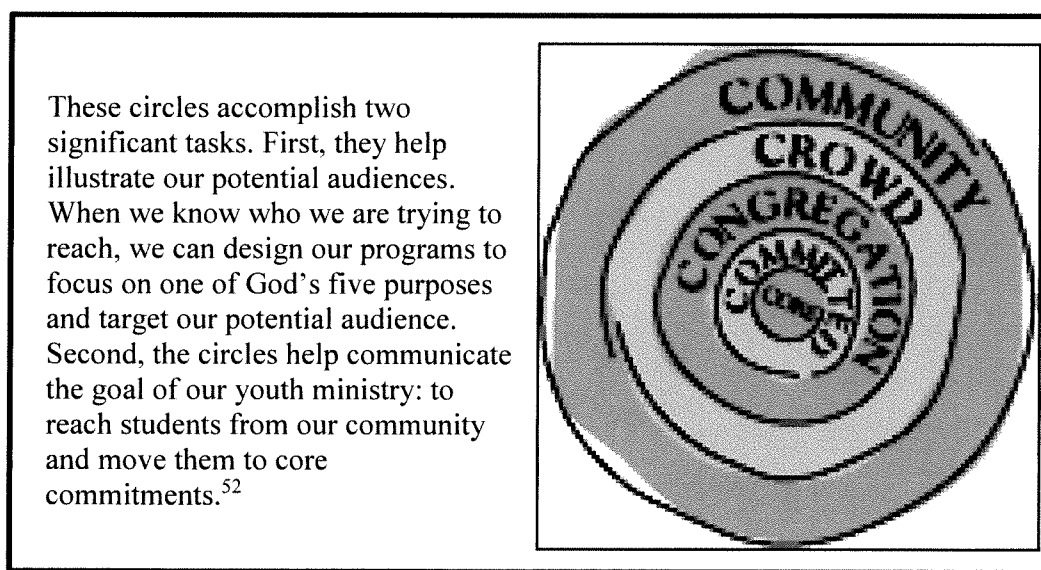


Figure 3 - Audiences in PDYM by Doug Fields

Fields concludes powerfully, “When we know who we are trying to reach, we can design our programs to focus on one of God’s five purposes and target our potential audience.”<sup>53</sup>

Duffy Robbins has a similar approach using an image funnel, which is a helpful visual

<sup>51</sup> Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 371-72.

<sup>52</sup> Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1283-87.

<sup>53</sup> Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1288-90.



reminder that the number of participating students in each audience has the tendency to shrink as their level of commitment increases.<sup>54</sup> These models and other key ministry conversations led to our adjusted model of “The Swirl.”

### **“The Swirl”**

In using the swirl, we follow Fields’ lead and try to teach at least quarterly about the process so that our students are aware of the model and the hope to better help them *own* their own faith journey – and *not* just where they are in their faith, but where they are going and growing!<sup>55</sup> Morphing the concentric circles into a spiritual path gives the model motion and movement – and an important distinction that we have added (as well as a slight adjustment of the audience descriptions) is the primary *connection* that most matters – a personal faith step to accept Christ and follow him.

More than just helping students know “*I AM HERE,*” it is truly about helping them think and dream about their next steps of

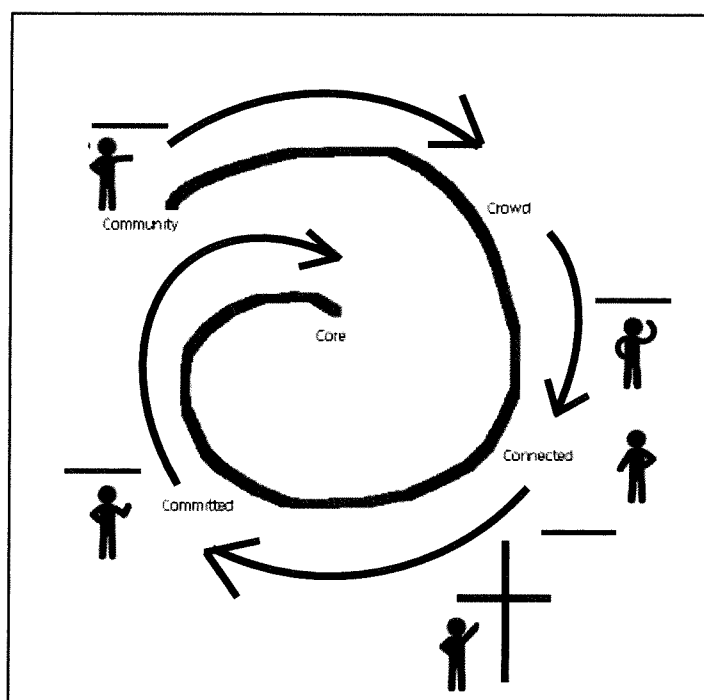


Figure 4 - The Swirl

growth! As a *grace*-full model (in the terms of Lucado) – “God loves you *right where you are*” – and so we do our best to communicate in ministry “and we love you too.”

<sup>54</sup> Robbins, *Youth Ministry Nuts and Bolts*, 229.

<sup>55</sup> Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1366-78.

Acceptance and care is extended to any student regardless of their background, experience in church, and even attitude. Also, though, there is a safe *nudge* to complete the other side of the coin of Lucado's maxim – "*God loves you too much to leave you there.*" We are called to grow! And so we also strive to do our best to ask the right questions about what being on the move in a spiritual journey could look like. Ultimately, it means being open to following Jesus in everyday, practical ways.

But for students who have yet to make a commitment to Christ, we must remember that often direction is more important than location when it comes to our faith! Many times we can minimize whether people are "in or out" regarding salvation or faith dedication and miss the bigger story of a journey that has different seasons and phases. Jim Belcher, in his book *Deep Church*, uses a marvelous image of a traveler being welcomed into a community and drinking from the life-giving well in the midst of that community. Belcher shares the following conversation:

"The way I see it," he said, "the emerging church wants to invite people into the community, not push them to have a 'decisional conversion.' There are some positives to this. I think it's legitimate to have an unbounded bounded set with no barriers to the church community so that non-Christians can wander in and out. But the bounded-set of the traditional church also has positives there are reasons for pushing people to make a decision to accept certain truths in order for them to understand that they are being converted from one way of life to another. " While they are in the midst of the community, they will either drink from the Well or not!<sup>56</sup>

As with the swirl, the strength of such a metaphor demonstrates that there are key moments of greater connection to the community, and ultimately a personal step to drink from the "living water," Jesus (John 7:38). Using language very similar to Fields' concentric circles of commitment, Belcher reflects that outsiders were being drawn into a

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<sup>56</sup> Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 100.

“crowd” that was interested in Jesus, and then some of them chose to become followers in the midst of his other disciples (“connected”). Ultimately, though, Jesus challenged them not to just be part of the family, but to be “committed” to him and grow deeper in their faith as they grew closer to him.<sup>57</sup> Belcher states about this kind of image of a spiritual process, “This demonstrates that though Jesus was in favor of inviting people into the community, he also challenged them to know whether or not they were truly following him.”<sup>58</sup> Perhaps one of the best ways to define personal faith ownership is “truly following Jesus.”

Commitment to a spiritual journey is not measured on the sentiment that “mommy wants me to go to church” or “I hang out at youth group so I have to fake like I believe this stuff.” Such immature theology is one reason that students so often lose their faith after high school. In communicating the gospel in clear ways, that balance of “an open invitation to a journey” *and* “a decisive challenge to make a commitment” must be present in our teaching. Two key scriptures come to mind that further illustrate this need.

First, Paul clearly writes in Romans 10 about both the heart commitment and mouth confession that are core of becoming a Christ-follower.

But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved. As Scripture says, “Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame.” For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without

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<sup>57</sup> Belcher, *Deep Church*., 100.

<sup>58</sup> Belcher, *Deep Church*., 101.

someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ. (Romans 10:8-17, NIV)

What a powerful articulation of the good news of Jesus Christ! The message of God’s salvation is open for all! (“Anyone who believes in him...” and “There is no difference between Jew and Gentile...” and “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”) And yet, there is still a definitive step of commitment that is owned both as a verbal proclamation of loyalty (“Jesus is *my* Lord”) and a spiritual depth of faith (“I believe God raised him from the dead.”) Even in the description of the “beautiful” ones who go out into the community to share the good news of Jesus, a spiritual process, much like a journey that requires steps is illustrated as people are sent so that others can hear and believe.

A second scripture that comes to mind is the Parable of the Sower. In Luke 8, Jesus tells this famous story:

As they went from town to town, a lot of people joined in and traveled along. He addressed them, using this story: “A farmer went out to sow his seed. Some of it fell on the road; it was tramped down and the birds ate it. Other seed fell in the gravel; it sprouted, but withered because it didn’t have good roots. Other seed fell in the weeds; the weeds grew with it and strangled it. Other seed fell in rich earth and produced a bumper crop. Are you listening to this? Really listening?” (Luke 8:4-8, The Message)

Jesus goes on to explain to his disciples that the word of God is the seed and that there are different types of openness in the hearts of people to receive such message of hope and salvation. Again, we can see faith as a spiritual journey with different stages. I have married this parable with the swirl and asked my students to think through their faith journey in terms of their soil. Concrete hard hearts (“the road” – without a commitment

or even openness to faith) aren't very receptive to the message of Christ. Rocky hearts ("the gravel" – open to check out faith and receive the word on the surface) might be very interested in a quick fix of spirituality in their lives, but aren't ready for deeper roots. Crowded and anxious hearts ("the weeds" – open to faith, but...) have received the word of faith, but are choked out by life's worries. The goal of good soil heart ("rich earth" – ready to receive the word of Christ in our lives) is all about a prepared openness that will not only grow in personal faith ownership, but will multiply seeds of faith for others.

I love the power of this parable – and the inherent "messiness" of looking at faith as a spiritual journey. Sometimes, I am good soil and sometimes I have a "weedy" heart of stress and sometimes I am shallow and sometimes I am as stubborn and hard as a rock! In the same way, we communicate with the swirl that this is a very dynamic picture of faith that changes daily – and so we need to be challenged to evaluate our faith daily as well. Not only do we need our *daily* bread (Luke 11:3), we also need to hear the pointed and personal call of Jesus: "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross *daily* and follow me" (Luke 9:23). As we do faith *together* with others in community, we can explore these personal reflections together and make the swirl part of a larger conversation about what it means to keep growing in our journey with Jesus.

To best use the swirl as a helpful tool of self-discovery, we then encourage students to ask themselves, "What are my *next steps*?" For each one, maybe it's considering the following:

- If I'm a "Community Person" (no real commitment to faith), maybe it's...Start asking questions about faith and God, Check out a church, Talk to a Christian, Find a safe place to explore faith with others, Pray.
- If I'm a "Crowd Person" (committed to just checking faith out), maybe it's...Consistent worship with a Christian community, Connect consistently with a

small group, Find a Christian friend you admire and ask good questions about faith and God, Crack open the Bible and seek God there, Pray.

- If I'm a "Connected Person" (committed to relationships that matter), maybe it's...Make the God connection and accept Christ personally, Deeply invest in others in small groups and/or accountability relationships, Look for ways to grow, Find a mentor, Pray.
- If I'm a "Christian" (one who has made a personal faith connection to Christ), maybe it's...Being intentional to connect with older mentors and ask them questions about their faith, Talk to your friends about the spiritual change that has taken place in your life, Pray.
- If I'm a "Committed Person" (real commitment to faith), maybe it's...Develop consistent habits of faith (Bible study, Accountability relationships, Giving of my time, treasure, and talents, Consistent Prayer times. This is where faith "ownership" should be most solidified.
- If I'm a "Core Person" (real commitment to serve/lead), maybe it's...Find ways to be a servant leader and use my gifts, Talk to others about God, Pray

While God's Spirit is going to help each of us find that life-giving relationship with Jesus in different ways and at different times in our lives, that is the goal of our faith. And often this personal faith connection comes after significant connections with other believers. Brian McLaren (and others) have deemed this "belonging before believing" and in many cases, this is very much true.<sup>59</sup> While every map has its imperfections, we have found that the swirl has been very accessible and encompasses many of the key conversations around faith commitment that help our students know that they are being called to a personal heart response to Jesus. While we have placed the cross between "connected" and "committed" to help students see this key step of personally accepting Christ in their journey, this step might happen in other ways. In the

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<sup>59</sup> Brian McLaren, *More Ready than We Realize* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), Kindle location 1038.

midst of all of these faith conversations, we must remember that it is God who makes things grow! (1 Cor. 3:7) Our task in ministry, however, is to help prepare the soil!

In looking at the model more specifically, there are several reasons why this model has been such an effective tool in our setting for students to reflect on their faith.

First, it is a model that makes sense. One of the main reasons that the swirl is helpful is to simplify our spiritual journey in such a way that students ask good questions about their place in God's story – and God's place in their story. (Obviously, our spiritual journey is far from simplistic, but this model gives them a path to consider and place themselves on.)

Here are some of the ways that students have reported that the swirl makes sense:

- Clear enough to understand, remember, and repeat
- Consistent for all ages and spiritual development
- Coupled and linked to intentional ministry events and even defining faith moments
- Connects the dots for people to see the significant friends who have helped them
- Considers strategic ways to implement the right programs and events to help students take next steps in their faith

Overall, if a student can say, “I am about here as I understand my journey right now” and “one or two ways that I can keep growing might look like this” and “I can think of a person by name who might be able to walk with me as I take that next step,” personal faith ownership is in motion! This personal self-assessment exercise is really for the student himself to try to think descriptively about his spiritual journey and be in a place of dialogue with his peers and key leaders to imagine further faith maturity for himself.

Second, the swirl also provides a venue for students to celebrate the defining moments and relationships of their past in very concrete ways. Since I firmly believe in the power of Christian community, the swirl has a very relational aspect that reinforces

for young people that God is often most active in nudging our faith to maturity in and through the relationships with our mentors and spiritual advisors. All throughout this swirl model is a picture of personal faith ownership in the context of community.

For those of us in ministry leadership, it is a crucial task for us to train our adult leaders to host these conversations well so that there is a great deal of safety and grace as students reflect on their faith. The authors of *The Slow Fade* offer excellent guidance as they write, “More so than searching for a marked finish line, then, the goal of a mentor is to remain in forward motion toward renewed starting lines...toward God.”<sup>60</sup> At the same time, programmatically we need to offer very particular options of experiences or events to point students in the direction of growth. Organizing ministry in this way shows a consistency to the students that fits for them and their own spiritual story. As this happens, powerful things unfold.

I specifically remember the moment when I realized the impact that a tool like the swirl would have in my youth ministry – both to challenge students to take personal ownership of their faith journey and understand the expectations that come with being in different places on the journey. As I asked the high school group to join in this task of self-discovery, two very active seniors quickly piped up (to be noticed by all), “We are *CORE* kids!” Certainly, these two girls were at youth group all the time, but often their attitudes were negative and immature, not necessarily interested in a spiritual walk. Really without thinking, I responded, “Great! Can I treat you like *CORE* kids?” More quickly than their original statement, this pair in unison shouted, “NO!” This is the moment I knew that the swirl was an excellent communication tool. They knew that as

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<sup>60</sup> Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith, *The Slow Fade* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2010), Kindle locations 836-37.



we grow further in our spiritual journey came a greater expectation of maturity and servanthood as part of their personal constellation of support.

As the swirl relates to our discussion of relational connections, it gives an essential opportunity for students to reflect on *how* God has shown up in the faith history of their lives, *where* they have grown from and are growing to, and *who* in their life God has used to nudge them on to take their next step. These mentoring-kind of people are exactly who the young person should continue to surround herself with as she continues to see their faith grow.

I am quick to let the students know that throughout the different seasons of our spiritual life we can shift to different places on the swirl, especially related to a sense of connection to the people of God. But I also am quick to remind them of the basic premise of it all – “God loves you right where you are, but he just loves you too much to leave you there!” Really, the swirl is just a framework to help a person discover the story of God’s activity as that person has been opened up to God and different people have walked beside them as they have grown in faith. This whole evaluation process is reflected in Paul’s opening to his letter to the Philippians:

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:3-6, NIV)

Thinking about the swirl, I remember Peter. Peter was a great young man who started attending our youth group as a freshman in high school. He had been invited by another friend to come to our “Lounge” ministry, a Friday night safe place with food and fun for students to choose as an alternative to less healthy activities in town. While Peter came from a great family, they had not really been involved in church, so this was a bit of

a new setting for him. But as Peter experienced a warm and welcoming atmosphere as a *community* kid, his openness increased and his friends encouraged him to join us for a youth group night simply to “check it out.” Now Peter was a *crowd* kid taking the next step with his friends accompanying him. Over a short period of time, Peter became consistent on youth group nights and began to feel a kinship with both his peers and the adult leaders in the ministry. As a *connected* kid, Peter was experiencing a sense of belonging and soon wouldn’t miss a youth group night.

His story of faith continues as he found himself drawn into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. He reflects on his faith journey by writing:

Key moments for me were: 1) Rachel going out of her way to make sure I felt welcome at the Lounge -- at a time when you're never really confident if you belong, this was the first signal that I was in the right place. 2) Sharing experiences with others in their spiritual journey and mentorship from Christian leaders helped make for healthy spiritual growth through high school and taught me that faith is both intensely personal and takes place within community 3) The "getting ready for what comes next" after high school workshops were very purposeful and identified potential threats to my still-maturing faith -- this helped me prepare and growth THROUGH the transition to college and set a firm foundation as my world and experiences grew beyond my hometown.<sup>61</sup>

While Peter has not been reading this thesis, it is amazing that his description is a perfect summary of this entire project! Because of these key elements, Peter just continued to grow. He became a *committed* student and invested in his own discipleship through Bible studies and personal devotions. He reflects on his step of faith to trust his life to Christ by writing:

Looking back I can't quite remember exactly when it happened, but I was at a local park after sunset and I walked to the furthest baseball diamond. The feeling of calm and peace is usually subtle but the calm and peace I felt this evening was different: it was overwhelming. It filled me up to overflowing and I knew it was God's calm and God's peace. All I had to do was say yes.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Evan Los, email message to author, May 26, 2015.

<sup>62</sup> Evan Los, email message to author, May 26, 2015.

Within a year of his first coming to the Lounge, Peter was inviting other friends to that same ministry. He was also giving of himself as a *core* kid, serving that year as a student leader on a mission trip to a Native American reservation. Obviously, the story of one person's faith journey cannot be minimized to only a couple of paragraphs, but Peter's journey just illustrates that as he reflected on his own faith journey using the swirl, it was an easily accessible tool to see the various dynamics that were involved and he grew step by step in his faith – and then continued to grow as he went off to college. He got plugged into campus ministry at his college and deepened his faith ownership from there.

When students *own* their faith in such a personal way and realize the vital need to be in fellowship as they journey, their faith sticks and continues to grow! And the outcome is what it's all about – kids who stay strong and don't graduate from their faith. Doug Fields calls these core kids who keep growing "student ministers." Fields articulately summarizes the endgame of all this work:

When the purpose of ministry is applied, you will graduate student ministers rather than program attendees, who are spectators with few roots to keep them planted in God's ways. Student ministers won't graduate from their faith when they graduate from the youth ministry. A healthy youth ministry will constantly encourage students to discover their gifts and put them into practice through ministry and mission opportunities.<sup>63</sup>

For the purpose of continually coming back to the thesis of this project, all of these programmatic tasks are secondary to the overall tone of challenging youth to own their faith personally and be connected to others as they grow. Obviously many teens would point to significant events in their lives like mission trips or church camps as places that were spiritually defining moments, maybe even mountaintops, for them. But

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<sup>63</sup> Fields, *Purpose Driven Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 773-76.

our youth ministry must be about so much more than just memories and moments. It is about a lifetime of following Jesus. Mark DeVries asserts:

Of course it's only logical to believe that the best way to reach teenagers is by creating a youth ministry. But in the long run, the teenagers in our churches will be affected by significant experiences with adults much more than by the mountaintop youth-group experiences that we spend so much energy creating. Everything we do in our youth ministries should be, first and foremost, about helping to give kids excuses to build connections with Christian adults.<sup>64</sup>

It is in looking for this excuse that we connect the dots in community and set the foundation for healthy ongoing growth.

### **Training Students to Create Their Own Constellations of Christian Support**

As mentioned earlier, the language of “constellation” most accurately reflects the model of relational connections that will be used for communicating the specific picture to be highlighted throughout the church as the goal of connecting the dots in community. A consideration of this concept will now be explored in a couple of different ways. First, the constellation model will be traced to its creator, Mark DeVries, and assessed. Next, a practical application of the model for the “third phase” of growing up will be inspected. This sets in motion a practical plan for repeatedly teaching the model at every level in the church to make it part of the unique vernacular of growing up faithfully in our congregation and it will be introduced as a primer for the Grad Prep Program itself. As a church then structures its ministry to be a network of support around each student – quite literally “a spiritual safety net” – they are ready to connect the dots in community.

Mark DeVries, in his work *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, clearly articulates this model of constellation. In his critique of the way that most churches rely on the paid staff to be *the* primary connector to all the students in the youth group, DeVries correctly

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<sup>64</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 90.

diagnoses this pattern of faith as being unsustainable and guarantees that running a youth program this way often leads to ministry “implosion.”<sup>65</sup> A much better model, one of constellation, utilizes the church staff as the “architect” of a network and web of key relationships of faith support for each individual student.<sup>66</sup> Just looking at the illustration from DeVries gives one a clear example of exactly what community can look like and how it can practically lead to both relational faith support in the present as well as set a pattern of projecting into the future the ideal of what ongoing faith support can look like for our graduating students.<sup>67</sup> Speaking directly to the strength of this paradigm, DeVries writes, “In this last design, the teenager is no longer a dangling appendage, no longer dependent on the faithfulness, longevity or availability of a single member of the body of Christ. Rather, that young person is at the center of a web, a convergent community connected not only to him or her but also to each other.”<sup>68</sup>

This model offers a brilliant visual, literally a picture of *koinonia*, that helps adults of the church see themselves connected with a young person (and even to each other). It also shows that this support comes without the heavy burden of unrealistic expectations that would be in place if there were

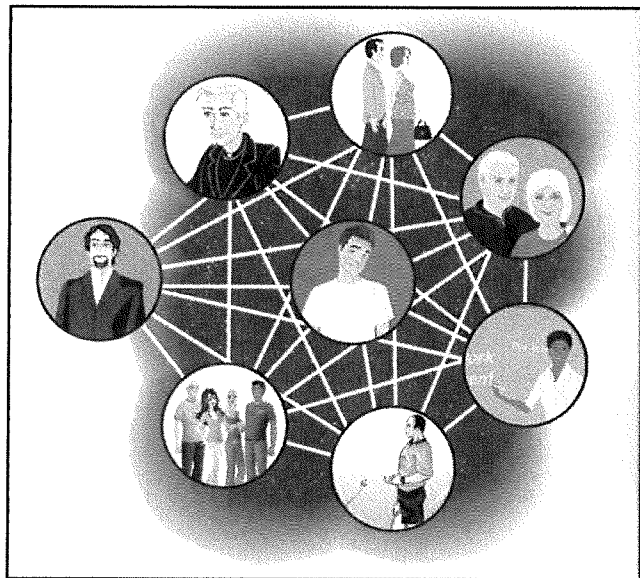


Figure 5 - Constellation model from Sustainable Youth Ministry

<sup>65</sup> Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 143.

<sup>66</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 144.

<sup>67</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 144.

<sup>68</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 144.

only one or two adults responsible for providing connection for each student. Here, each adult sees himself as only a part of the whole network, an essential part of the team, to be sure, but still only a part. Contemplating this picture, we can easily reflect upon the echo of Paul's exhortation: "But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body" (1 Corinthians 12:18-20, NIV). Intertwined and built up, this kind of relational connecting of the dots powerfully demonstrates (in a visual way) the high calling for the church to be the church for each other, as well as for their children.

A close relative to this constellation model is shared in *Sticky Faith*. Described as "5:1" relationships, the goal is to "reverse the youth ministry ratio."<sup>69</sup> Instead of doing the bare minimum of establishing a connection between one adult and five young people (in a small group, for instance, or meeting a ratio need), we should instead elevate the power of adult support. By gaining adult backers for each youth, we seek to intentionally link up five adults to pour into the life of one specific student. Again, their support can come in a variety of ways, both big and small. But the key comes in actually connecting the dots, stating clearly that such a relationship exists and that the adult in the scenario has made a commitment to walk alongside the student during this chapter of her life. What kind of an impact do such relationships make? Kara Powell writes, "According to one study, teens who had five or more adults from the church invested in them during the ages of 15 to 18 were less likely to leave the church after high school."<sup>70</sup> Again, this concrete picture of

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<sup>69</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1147-49.

<sup>70</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle Locations 1147-1149.

how fellowship connections can be accomplished is very persuasive in lifting up the concept of becoming equipped to make a difference in the life of a young person.

While the 5:1 graphic is a strong demonstration of the power of relationships, I prefer the constellation model. The arrangement (and language) has so much creative potential to challenge others to practically live out spiritual nurture in community. Certainly, there is so much more that could be explored about this approach. In fact, care must be given with this model to not support a self-centered worldview that thinks “the world revolves around me!” This just plays into one of the key developmental issues that all adolescents struggle with.<sup>71</sup> A great strength of the constellation metaphor is that each one of us, adults included, has interlocking and connected webs of support. We must reinforce that the dots are connected in mutual ways and that the adults in these students’ lives need care and support too! But for now it must simply be highlighted that for adults who do care enough to become aware of the state of affairs for the emerging generation, an impact can be made. For such a commitment to connect with young people and participate in their lives by being equipped as key advocates, there is a beautiful term for that mentor’s role in the constellation: You are a star!

Becoming stars (not even “superstars” – just simply stars) at some level is about being prayerful, practical and intentional (there’s that word again) in building up support in the lives of young people with whom we have influence. For many years, Search Institute has been advancing a developmental model using the term *assets*. It is a persuasive way of understanding internal and external factors in the lives of young people. These assets (Search Institute has designated forty such assets in all) are defined

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<sup>71</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle Locations 703-704.

as “concrete, common sense, positive experiences and qualities essential to raising successful young people.”<sup>72</sup>

Some examples of the Search Institute Developmental Assets listed are:

***External Assets:***

#2 – *Positive family communication*

#9 – *Service to others*

#10 – *Safety*

#14 – *Adult role Models*

***Internal Assets:***

#22 – *School engagement*

#25 – *Reading for pleasure*

#29 – *Honesty*

#26 – *Peaceful conflict resolution*

Armed with a tremendous amount of social science research, this model correlates both the life and faith choices of young people and their number of assets they perceive themselves to possess. The greater the number of assets a child has, the healthier that child’s approach to life will be (and less likely that they will participate in at-risk behaviors.)<sup>73</sup> This practical approach of providing support to young people gives a congregation many easy avenues for offering encouragement.

I was at a workshop with Mark Holmen, author of *Faith Begins at Home*,<sup>2</sup> when he shocked his audience. Holmen was citing the work of Search Institute and showing that the more assets a young person possesses, the more healthy their life choices, as well as their strength of character and faith. He then teased the crowd with the assertion that a *direct association* exists between one specific asset as a potential producer of an additional twenty five assets!<sup>74</sup> Every listener was intrigued by the implications. He responded, “Participation in religious community (Asset #19) is the key. If the church is

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<sup>72</sup> Mark Holman, *Faith Begins at Home* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005), 69.

<sup>73</sup> Holman, *Faith Begins at Home*, 70.

<sup>74</sup> Holman, *Faith Begins at Home*, 70.



being the church, then any number of bonus assets are potentially added from caring mentors to opportunities for service to the feeling of safety and worth.” And on and on it goes. This tool from Search Institute is just one among many that can be brought to bear to assist our congregations in being trained and equipped to be the stars that God is calling them to be.

A long-term approach to fashioning a strategy of equipping would cover several different phases in a person’s life. This would also take into consideration different people who would be the builders (what DeVries calls “architects”) of those constellations. As I have sought to expand on DeVries’ constellation example, I have described the following three age phases.

## The “Constellation” Model in 3 Phases

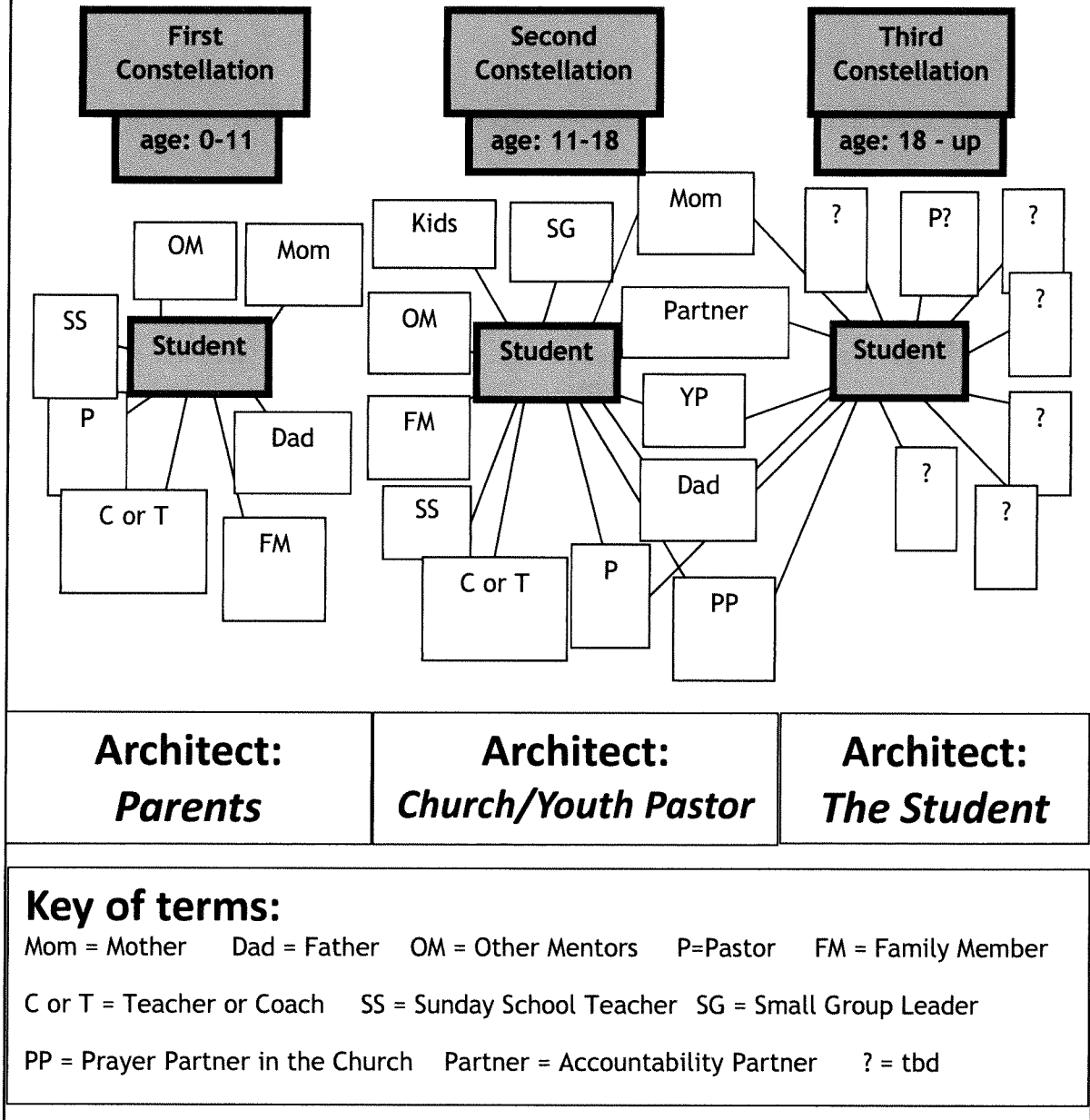


Figure 6 - Constellation Model in 3 Phases

In Phase One (aged 0-11), this childhood season of life has the parents as the primary architect of their constellation who surround their child with caring mentors. In Phase Two (age 11-18), this traditional youth group season of life would look to the church and the youth pastor to assist in providing key mentors for the constellation of the youth, in partnership with families. (This assumes that the church is wise and follows the model of Mark DeVries from *Sustainable Youth Ministry*.) Then, in Phase Three (age 18-??), the responsibility for creating that constellation truly falls to the graduate herself.

I strongly believe that much work needs to happen in the equipping and preparation of our young people to be at a place where they are capable to form that support network on their own. There are many different aspects to be considered in helping this happen with intention and planning, as well as with prayer. This task truly should be the foundational feature of church's Grad Prep Program if they wish to effectively launch their graduates. And the grads themselves need to hear that they will have some sort of network of relationships after graduation. It will be up to them whether this web of supportive friendships happens by default or design.

Prior to this Phase Three season, the vast majority of key players of influence (spiritual and otherwise) in the lives of adolescents have been caring adults. The percentage of adult mentors, however, will most certainly be inverted as they head into college. While in high school, a young person might have 75-80% of his core encouragement coming from parents, mentors, teachers, extended family, and adult friends at the church, even after several months at college, we can assume that the 80% number (if not more) is more likely to relate to the same-age peers of that student. Certainly, parents and pastors and mentors can still have an influence (often from a

distance and perhaps aided with modern technology), but it would appear that this influence also can diminish with distance. We must drive home the fact that they will have a constellation of people surrounding them in their new setting, either by default or design, so the ownership of their faith will again be closely tied to the ownership of their own constellation of Christian community.

As pastors and church leaders, we have often put so much pressure on ourselves to be *the* key connectors to our students, only to find that we come quickly to our limitations. Were we to approach these opportunities with our students as an architect of their constellation (and our programs as the vehicles that support these relationships), our role changes radically. Doug Fields offers a great boost to this shifted outlook by expressing:

Don't attempt to be the super-hero youth worker who's constantly busy trying to meet everyone's needs. Instead, be the super-connector. If your goal is for students to be known and loved, it doesn't have to be with you. This may require some new thinking. As a limited, imperfect person, you have a finite capacity for meaningful relationships. If you're the only one connecting with students, you'll be a bottleneck to any potential growth and genuine care.<sup>75</sup>

But if we work toward equipping others to make connections of significance, we will both partner well with families and articulate to students themselves their role in being creators of their constellation while still in high school. This effort prepares our youth with the tools necessary to continue to initiate mentoring relationships in the future.

As parents and relatives, we have worried and fretted about the peer relationships that seem to become more and more central to the lives of our children. We have wondered if the impact we have as parents (and other caring adults) will make a lasting

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<sup>75</sup> Doug Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), Kindle Locations 1517-20.

impact at all. Again, the bulk of their formative relationships in their college years will be with their peers, so the season before high school graduation is a prime time for our students to practice building relationships of Christian accountability as a noteworthy goal of their faith.

We should help our children come to grips with the truth of the proverb: “Walk with the wise and become wise, for a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20, NIV). Still, we can’t wait for them to leave the nest to come to realize these relational forces for the first time. We have to find ways for them to visualize the web of connections that surround them and make a plan of the kind of follower of Christ they would like to become. We can then help them practice the discipline of community to motivate that growth. Whatever our mentoring role, we are prudent to follow the pattern of Paul’s high hopes for his young disciples in Philippi. As he wrestled with his distance from them, he nonetheless communicated clearly the fact that he believed in them and their continuing faith.

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose. (Philippians 2:12, 13, NIV)

As we seek to communicate that we too have *faith* in the faith of our young people, using a constellation model gives us an effective pictorial instrument to have great conversations with students to inspire ongoing community building. While we have only begun to delve into the potential of the constellation tool, efforts to maximize such a perspective will lead our churches and families and the students themselves to be well prepared for the future.

In fact, as a uniform philosophy is adopted by a congregation, we can begin to reverse the disturbing trends we have been examining. With each step of investment, churches can start getting “un-stuck,” letting their commitment to the next generation as part of the church in the here and now guide the Church to a new day of hope. Entire congregations can be transformed to regain a strong sense of fellowship and community. Parents as well would be fully engaged as partners in this process. No longer ambiguous and uncertain, they could be empowered in multiple ways to boost the faith impressions they make on their own children. Finally, such a unifying church-wide vision with concise tools that demonstrate Christian community will lead individual youth ministries to become focused in their effective training of their students about to graduate. Such a reversal is not only possible, it is urgent. Changing long-standing perspectives about church life is never easy, but it is time for the shift to occur. Hard work and dedication on all fronts can be the motivation for seeing our children better prepared for the transitions and challenges that confront them.

As the specifics of a Grad Prep Program are proposed, we will be able to reinforce for the students the fact that as they graduate from our youth ministry, we want to see them fully own their faith and be fully equipped to go and be the architect of the constellation in their next phase of life! This will more fully develop the practical edge of living out the vision of connecting the dots in community for our young people. Essential opportunities for our students to *practice* key competencies in their families and church family should be advanced so that they are truly prepared for what lies before them. Specific training within the Grad Prep Program will not only introduce them to the faith challenges that exist after graduation, but will give them tools to deal with those

challenges. And as the wider congregation is invited into a full partnership and commitment in this process, older saints will communicate that they are here for their youth both now and as they continue to mature and grow.

I find that the constellation model is an excellent device to help everyone in the congregation be on the same page in understanding the goals both of faith ownership and relational connections. Even earlier in DeVries' writing career, the seeds of a constellation model were being planted. DeVries relates the work of the "Faithful Parents, Faithful Kids" research in *Family-Based Youth Ministry* and describes "a single faith-nurturing factor that was present in more than 90 percent of the families surveyed."<sup>76</sup> That factor? The researchers discovered that (while not a "sure-fire formula"), there was great consistency with one thing: "Those who stuck with their faith ... had a half-dozen 'mentors' present during their growing up years."<sup>77</sup>

It is vital to realize that God's design for us to be intimately connected in fellowship – in a relational web – needs to be rediscovered and practiced throughout our churches and youth groups. If we do not recapture a vision of such intertwined life-giving friendships, we will continue to struggle with the counterfeit replacements of cultural consumerism, materialism, and performance.<sup>78</sup>

We have a great task before us to constantly articulate the constellation model for our churches, families, and students in a way that they are challenged to reflect on their own networks. Again, this is a consistent message found in some of the key resources we have already reviewed. Roberto, Black, and Martinson reinforce that the students who

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<sup>76</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 85.

<sup>77</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 85.

<sup>78</sup> John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing Incorporated, 2012), Kindle locations 623-26.

demonstrated the strongest faith after high school were “surrounded by multiple, reinforcing spheres of relational Christian influence...immersed in a larger, multi-generational community of quality relationships informed by faith in Jesus Christ.”<sup>79</sup> And they go on to say that it is critical that this “web of relationships (be) woven within a safe, creative environment” where connections are tended to in such a positive way that one cannot help but experience a real “family atmosphere.”<sup>80</sup>

Such a commitment to connections looks very different from the normal experience of adolescents today, where their interaction with older generations has been driven to the edges of their lives. In *Consuming Youth*, the authors drive home this point by declaring that a great cultural swing has happened in the last century in the United States. They write, “Youth were separated from significant social roles in communities. Youth roles are now limited to education, consumption, and peer relationships. Youth were separated from networks of care in communities, including, to varying degrees, families and local”<sup>81</sup> Our churches have the great opportunity to rebuff this trend and create something different for young people in our midst, however. Berard, Penner, and Bartlett continue in their aspirations for the ministry of the church:

When essential “connectedness” happens, teenagers find others who will support them. They’ll find “mentorship and support,” ....there will be “a readiness and willingness to serve each other. They will find adults who include youth in the “adult world,” helping them actually become a real part of it. They will find adults and a wider community that demonstrates an adult resilience—with adults coming back again and again in their efforts to connect with teens—in spite of teenagers’ apparent disinterest. But in order for any of this to happen, youth must actually engage with adults—a community of adults, in fact.”<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1794-95.

<sup>80</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2683-87.

<sup>81</sup> John Berard, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett, *Consuming Youth: Navigating Youth from Being Consumers to Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 345-47.

<sup>82</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 987-93.



It is the task, then to see youth ministry programs in the midst of multiple and overlapping constellations of support and relationship – “essential connectedness.” As personal faith ownership is then embraced, the church can continue to be a home base of nurture and encouragement. We are now almost ready to fully set the stage for the specific Grad Prep Program to be most effective in equipping our students before graduation. We only need to briefly explore the ongoing ways that our congregations can provide faith encouragement as a type of “home base” and then we’ll be prepared to dissect the details of a Grad Prep Program. Throughout all our conversations about this thesis and connecting the dots in community, the metaphor of constellation is central and essential to the building of any kind of program. Mark DeVries beautifully writes, “But my experience is also that youth ministry, when structured deliberately, can be a catalyst for connecting young people to a fertile constellation of faith-forming friendships across the generations. This is youth ministry at its best and most sustainable.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Provides Ongoing Encouragement from Home Base**

Within the last segment of considering the ways in which a holistic program can be implemented, the development of a strategy for keeping the connections going from the “home base” of the congregation for its students will be considered. Obviously studies demonstrate that the support of the wider congregation matters to nurture both families and their youth as they mature. To make the greatest impact for the long haul for our students, then, one vital word should become a church mantra: “ongoing!” Ongoing support that continues past the normally assumed “finish line” of graduation. Ongoing communication that lets the students know that they still matter and are still part of the

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<sup>83</sup> Mark DeVries. “Blog Divided,” YM Architects, <http://ymarchitects.com/3927/blog-divided-by-mark-devries-yma-president>, (accessed December 15, 2012).

family. A significant part of the plan needs to be about practical ways to encourage the faith of these youth in ongoing ways. As Kara Powell discovered in her Sticky Faith research, there are many heart wrenching stories of youth group graduates who felt like when they were done with youth group, the church was done with them.<sup>84</sup> By way of introduction, four particular projects will be illustrated, but each congregation should take the initiative to develop their own unique flavor of ongoing support.

With so much pressure to perform – and to transition well beyond high school and not be deemed “a loser” – it is tragic how many of our graduates feel like they “age out” of youth group and truly don’t have a place in our congregations again until they come back with their own children! As they struggle to see where God fits in their life, can the church remain close to them?<sup>85</sup> If our grads are reporting that they feel “invisible” in the eyes of their churches after they leave high school, how can we better continue to *see* both them and their needs?<sup>86</sup> Some of the staff at *Think Orange* came to two powerful conclusions as they evaluated the “critical need for adults to connect relationally” with our grads and diagnose an effective response to our shortsightedness with our meager spiritual investments as churches:

1. We are disconnecting from teenagers at graduation, when the stakes are the highest.
2. We are not tapping into our relational influence, when the felt need is the greatest.”<sup>87</sup>

The stakes are high and the need is great, so “ongoing” *must be* a given for a church family that wants something better for its graduates.

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<sup>84</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2540-47.

<sup>85</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong*, Kindle locations 2214-2219.

<sup>86</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong*, Kindle locations 2326-28.

<sup>87</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 228-39.

First, an add-on to the church-wide prayer partner program will be the commitment of our adult pray-ers to do a “plus one” year for the student’s first year out of high school. The Sticky Faith curriculum advises just such an effort and gives a tangible way to let our grads know that they we are still very much relationally committed to being there for them in ongoing ways.<sup>88</sup> Plus, the traction that both the adult mentor and the student have established during their senior year could allow for some intentional accountability around spiritual goals for the student during their post-high years.

Second, the church should be proactive in creating ministry opportunities for college-aged students that are elevated and affirmed as significant. For those who remain in their home town, growing into leadership in appropriate ways within the church’s youth ministry, worship team, or any number of service venues should be a high priority. Even for those students who only return for the summer, using mission trips or possible ministry internships could provide effective avenues for students to stay engaged in their home church and clearly convey from the congregation’s perspective that their involvement matters. Young people during this season of life are so craving adults to notice their potential and affirm their ability to contribute.<sup>89</sup> There must be a palpable appreciation of the fact that our young people have much potential to be contributors and not just consumers in our churches.<sup>90</sup>

Third, the church should establish frequent paths for ongoing communication to specific students through a variety of means. Not only should social media and

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<sup>88</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 978-79.

<sup>89</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2271-74.

<sup>90</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 327-29.

technology efforts be expanded to invite students to stay in touch with folks at home and other peers, the people at home need to be ones who take the first step as a matter of good will and care for the students. Seasonal care packages with hand-written notes are truly worth their weight in gold for lonely college students. As mentioned earlier, the high impact of such endeavors far outweighs the work to pull it off. As a practice, I have tried to keep a mental list of my grads and reach out to them frequently with texts or phone calls just to say “I’m thinking of you.” I know that in my own life, I still have a postcard that my youth pastor wrote to me almost 25 years ago when I was a freshman in college. It meant so much to me then – and still does. Such little things become big things during times of transition. David Olshine makes this list of practical ways to stay involved, even over long distances:

- Who doesn’t like a surprise package?
- Visit them. Take trips to colleges to connect with your graduates.
- Offer gatherings for those locally who don’t attend college.
- Host events over Christmas when college kids are home for a week.
- Send a handwritten letter instead of sending an e-mail using social media. Letters are personal and few write them anymore.
- Send e-mail blasts with an encouraging Scripture.
- Follow up and keep connected.<sup>91</sup>

Olshine concludes, “Life after high school can be a horrific time of alienation and loneliness. Some students feel disconnected from their faith community...Let’s change the outcome of seniors in high school. We need to get this one right by grooming students to learn and lead, and if this happens, there is a great chance of their being ready for post-high school living.”<sup>92</sup> I couldn’t agree more!

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<sup>91</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong*, Kindle locations 2326-39.

<sup>92</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong*, Kindle locations 2340-43.

Last, as leaders and mentors who have journeyed with these students while in youth group, we need to find ways to demonstrate our ongoing acceptance and love for them, even (and maybe especially) if/as they stray from their faith. As we rethink our philosophy of ministry in such a way that we commit to run the race with our students and no longer see the “finish line” of our spiritual responsibilities at high school graduation (what the authors of *The Slow Fade* call the most critical and strategic decision a church can make to better help our grads), we will need to display our commitment relationally in various ways.<sup>93</sup> Primarily, it comes down to simply making the effort to let them know we are there for them, no matter what. When it comes to “making every effort” to go the extra mile, we have much encouragement from scripture!

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6, NIV)

Living a worthy life is living like Christ, humbly and patiently bearing with (fully accepting, putting up with) each other. In the context of thinking about times when children of our congregation are wandering, it is a great reminder that patience is sometimes translated “longsuffering.” To be like Jesus with our young friends through the ups and downs of one of the most difficult stages of life, will we be patient (“*longsuffering*”) with compassion (“*to suffer with*”)? So often, I see young people who have been struggling with moral choices or feeling guilty for potentially disappointing their church family that they run away and hide. Shame is a horrible (and ultimately inefficient) motivator to support faith ownership. We as God’s people and the church as

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<sup>93</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 163-66.

their home base are called to be “safe people and safe places to share their struggles so they can find a haven of love and understanding when they fall.”<sup>94</sup> To lead with love and acceptance, accompanied by accountability as a follow-up, is essential to illustrate our grace-full commitment to be there for them.

When we show that “home” isn’t going to bail on them, I truly believe that it helps our students not bail on their faith. As we stay relationally connected, we demonstrate our commitment to journey with them as (what Erik Erickson called) “affirming companions,” people who care about their stories and ongoing growth.<sup>95</sup> As we continue to communicate our love to them, even if their journeys may take them to a “far off land” spiritually, we will be poised to welcome them home with genuine grace. (See the story of the “lost son” in Luke 15.)

The following from David Olshine drives home the powerful need for our graduates as they prepare to leave high school:

The safety net of church or youth group is finished. Millions of eighteen- to twenty-year -olds will not return to the church and will “graduate from God.” For those who had a good or great church experience, now that seems like a distant dream of the past. It’s time to start brand-new for the high school graduate...Meanwhile the youth ministry has done a “good-bye Sunday” and maybe a “graduation Sunday,” which are nice ways to honor and celebrate seniors graduating but lack significant substance and any sustaining power or impact. We have not prepared our seniors well for a new life outside high school...Will the church engage with these seniors and help them succeed at the next level?<sup>96</sup>

Olshine leaves us with the truly core question we have been exploring throughout this entire project, “will the church engage?” If we are to be the people of God committed to invest in the ongoing faith ownership of our young people by connecting the dots in

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<sup>94</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle Locations 585-86.

<sup>95</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle Locations 1237-44.

<sup>96</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong*, Kindle locations 2222-39.

community with them and their families, we need to know that the wisest people always think *long-term* when they consider their investments. In the best case scenarios, we have had over 18 years to pour into families with babies who grow to children who grow to adolescents who put on caps and gowns and are at the precipice of their next phase of life after high school. By providing ongoing encouragement from the “home base,” we are “protecting our investments” and seeking to continue our spiritual influence in the lives of our children.<sup>97</sup>

### **The Framework of the Grad Prep Program**

“We can hope that after us, future generations will have been awakened to the need of fellowship from their childhood up, and that this will be as natural for them as our fierce independence is for us.”

– Paul Tournier, *Escape from Loneliness*

“Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” (Hebrews 10:23-25, NIV)

Now that we have fleshed out how a holistic program needs a healthy congregational environment to thrive and be successful, the stage is set to build the framework of a specific Grad Prep Program for our ministry. And it is essential to return to the very beginning of this project to be reminded of both the great ache of loneliness that is so pervasive for many of our grads in this season of life and the greater invitation to stay relationally connected to Christian community for the duration. If you are anything like me, you’ve been acutely aware of our need for some kind of specific support in this area for years. And even now as we have been experimenting with a framework for a Grad Prep Program, I am convinced that being in the midst of the

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<sup>97</sup> Joiner, Bomar, and Smith, *The Slow Fade*, Kindle locations 170-73.

struggle *with* our grad, wrestling together with them during this season is more important than having a finely finessed “canned” program. We know that what most matters is that a framework or outline of the essentials will help our churches and families get moving in the right direction of support.

So after 20+ years of youth ministry, my fatigue of watching the spiritual investments made in so many of my students get flushed during the college years has started to be replaced by a *hope* in some strategic responses to dream for something better. And personally, I’m as motivated for my own family, my kids, as I am for my ministry to the students in our congregation. I want to see the faith of my children be strong for the long haul – and I don’t get to start caring about that when my kids are in their cap and gown! It’s essential that attention and intention must be given to this concern from their childhood up – so that they can know their need for fellowship. And as I have a church come alongside me as I seek to be a proactive parent, this can be a natural expectation for my kids.

To respond to the reality of students graduating from their faith as they transition from high school and no longer be comfortable with this being “normal,” we will boldly challenge our students, our families, and our congregation – “Do you *know* your need for fellowship and spiritual connection? If so, what are you willing to do about it?” Since this is so obviously a whole church issue, we have made commitments in our setting to use the structure of this Grad Prep Program to help us all wake up to these issues, but more specifically *prepare* our students for the next step. It is our way of answering the key question: “Who will be there for them? Will the church?” We say, “YES! This church will be there for them with a Grad Prep Program that connects the dots in community.”



To best examine the Grad Prep Program framework, the following steps will be taken. First, key communication about the guts of the program will be essential for all involved. Second, this program will communicate the heart of a constellation model and then help students practice creating the right kinds of relationships for their faith to be nurtured both now and into the future. Third, this program will host the right kinds of conversations (and utilize a variety of curriculum resources) to prepare them to better own their personal faith, pledge to an ongoing investment in Christian fellowship, and accurately set their expectations for some of the specific challenges that lie ahead in the next couple of years. Next, it will require them to practice key competencies that will be invaluable as they make this transition. Last, we will explore some program specifics about how we have devised our strategy.

### **Key Communication**

Now that the wider church, families, and our youth ministry have bought into the unified vision of connecting the dots in community, the upper-class students in our congregations need to hear this vital statement in two parts. First: “A time is coming, when you will be *without* most of the support network you have known.” Intellectually, they certainly know this, but have yet to feel it. We need to proclaim it to them and drive this fact home so that when they do feel it, they are ready and equipped. The second part of the key communication is this: “And if you don’t *practice* being intentional and committed to Christian community and partnerships of accountability, you just might become a statistic.” Repetition of this message in many different venues is essential and must be followed up with the statistics that we have covered in this project. Let’s consider three specific statistics in a very personal way (with a picture – permission

granted - from my youth group).<sup>98</sup> While these students are real, this exercise is only representative of percentages found in the research and does not infer anything about the actual spiritual state of each student.



Figure 7 – Students Who Report Being “Spiritually Ready”

Statistic #1

- *Six out of seven* graduating youth group seniors don’t feel very equipped with faith that prepares them for college.<sup>99</sup>

This means that of the fourteen students in this picture, only *TWO* of them (Mariah and Matthew) would report that they are spiritually *ready* for the college transition! It is so ironic that while our high school students often have taken SAT prep classes, been

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<sup>98</sup> Recently, I heard Kara Powell at a Sticky Faith presentation encourage us to do this very exercise. (Ironically, this draft had preceded her presentation, but I consider it a great affirmation of the effort to make these statistics personal.)

<sup>99</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2572-75.

offered multiple college-level academic courses at their high schools, and even received literature from their colleges about being organized with finances and furniture before they arrive on campus, I believe that for many of our students and their families, very little thought has gone into their faith preparation in advance of this dramatic (and sometimes traumatic) transition. One foremost impetus for writing this thesis is the challenge of directly affecting this statistic in a positive way.



Figure 8 - Students Who Drift

#### Statistic #2

- Nearly 50% of active youth group seniors drift away from the Lord within 18 months of graduation.<sup>100</sup>

This means that of the fourteen students in this picture, *seven* of them (Mariah, Ashley, Emelia, Ilcy, Cristina, Matthew, and Anna) will stay active, engaged and growing in their

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<sup>100</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 93-95.

faith by about their 20<sup>th</sup> birthday. As mentioned earlier, there are others who believe the number of students who stick with their faith is even lower, but for the sake of this discussion, the Sticky Faith research suffices. For our churches to look at the overarching problem highlighted by this thesis and “take it personally,” we need to look at similar pictures in our own congregations and ask ourselves some difficult questions. “Are we comfortable imagining that Derek, Garrett, Brian, Isaac M., Kayla, Kelsi, and Isaac S. have drifted from their personal faith?” Of course, we would answer, “NO!” Beyond this one word response, though, we must then discern what we will do differently in our congregations and families to make for a different reality for our kids.

Of course, we must constantly be reminded that Jesus himself is the one who has compassion on all of us, especially those who are “harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36, NIV). And the commitment of Jesus is to “seek and save the lost” (Luke 19:10, NIV). This even means leaving behind the 99 sheep in the flock to find the one lost sheep (Luke 15:1-7). Even beyond scripture, we know of countless testimonies of people who have survived seasons of lostness, only to have their stories (and even their hurts and mistakes) redeemed by the life-changing power of Jesus Christ. We cannot lose hope because of the statistics we are considering or have a warped perception that somehow all of these faith dynamics rest fully on our churches and ministries properly having our acts together to insure the durability of faith for our youth. The only guarantees that we have in this arena are the great and true promises of God!

Jesus says, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:20, NIV). The apostle Paul is convinced that nothing “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39, NIV).

Countless other scriptures should stay prominent as we prayerfully remember that each of us finds ourselves in the midst of God's story and that we have a savior who pursues us with love. There is great hope that we must hold onto as we wrestle with these facts.

At the same time, we are called as parents and spiritual leaders to recognize that God calls us to nurture our children and has given us a great responsibility to pass on faith to the next generation. Jesus speaks in very strong terms that there are dire consequences for anyone who "causes one of these little ones to stumble" (Matthew 18:6, NIV). If we refuse to accept that *half* of our students have a good chance of walking away from our faith, then we must be committed to shift the way we have been doing things and together create something new to produce a different outcome.

I must reiterate an important point here. The *Sticky Faith* numbers demonstrate that half of our active seniors in high school will become inactive in their faith over the next 18 months. The harsh truth is that by the time many of our church-going kids become seniors, many of them have *already disengaged* from participation in youth ministry – and in many cases – from their faith. So the reality is this: most of our churches are losing *much more* than half of our graduating classes after high school simply because we have lost many kids even before graduation! Mark DeVries speaks to this misfortune, "Most churches have experienced the mass exodus of eleventh- and twelfth-graders from their youth groups. By the time teenagers are sixteen or seventeen, they will make one of two choices regarding the church: either they will become increasingly invested or they will drop out altogether."<sup>101</sup> I very much concur with his conclusion. We must find intentional ways to help the students themselves become

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<sup>101</sup> DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry*, 140.

invested (*Don't forget: "We own what we help to create!"*) and continue to forge the way for all of us to structure an environment that sets this as a high goal and expectation.

But now comes one of the discouraging (and conversely maybe optimistic) aspects of the research from *Sticky Faith*. Not everyone who drifted from their faith was planning on it.



Figure 9 - Students Who Intended to Stick with Their Faith

### Statistic #3

- Approximately 80% of those students who floated from their faith had every intention of sticking with their faith!<sup>102</sup>

For our discussion, then, this means that Garrett, Brian, Isaac M., Kayla, and Kelsi were – for the most part – visualizing themselves continuing in their faith and their church

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<sup>102</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 105-110

participation at some level beyond college. Really only two young people in this picture, Isaac S. and my godson Derek had made the decision to exit their faith on purpose after high school. (Note: While I am obviously just using specific and real students in a hypothetical situation, I am intentionally making this personal for me so that it will be personal for you as you read this.)

So, how is this statistic both discouraging and optimistic? I would diagnose the scenario in the following way: It is discouraging because the great majority of those students who are leaving their faith are doing so because they have lacked some degree of personal faith ownership that would inspire them to stick with it. They have also left because weren't ready for the tidal wave of changes that accompany this life transition, which we know from countless testimonies can be summed up in the word "overwhelming."<sup>103</sup> And at some level they have vacated their faith simply from inattention, a kind of "spiritual entropy" where things have a tendency to fall apart.

At the same time, I believe that this situation is also very optimistic. If 80% of these grads *state* that their plans were to stay engaged in their faith journey during the next phase of their lives, then it is on us as their spiritual family to do all that we can do to help them fully grasp all that is at stake for them and their faith during this transition. We can with great force and inspiration demonstrate our dedication to help them succeed in living out their goal of staying with their faith. In many ways, we are affirming for them their own autonomy and reinforcing that their choices do matter. This critical developmental task, along with identity and belonging, Chap Clark lists as one of primary factors toward maturity.<sup>104</sup> If it is the student's choice ("autonomy") to keep connected to

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<sup>103</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2609-14.

<sup>104</sup> Chap Clark, *Daughters and Dads* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 82.

Jesus, a community of faith, and a growing faith, then we should do all we can to help her achieve this goal.

This provides such a hopeful introduction to the Grad Prep Program itself! We can communicate to our students who are themselves stating that they have every intention of staying with their faith that we are here to help equip them to be ready for the big transitions that are coming. It has been said (attributed to Alexander Graham Bell), “Before anything else, preparation is the key to success.” This is exactly the sentiment behind our approach with this Grad Prep Program. We can declare, “Dear friends, you know the statistics about grads and their faith after high school. *But* you don’t have to become another statistic of lost faith! This doesn’t have to be your story! Let’s discover together how you can connect the dots in community and stay strong for the long haul!”

### **The Grad Prep Program Defined**

We define the essentials of our Grad Prep Program as a ministry for juniors and seniors in high school to be encouraged to own their faith after graduating by hosting the right conversations, creating the right relationships, and practicing the right habits in the midst of Christian community *now* so that our students are prepped to continue to do so as they transition after graduation. This program intensely asserts that a prepped faith is the best faith! One vital aspect of this kind of program is to help set realistic expectations about what is coming and help the students wrestle with these dynamics before they come face to face with them. Later in this paper we will examine some research about how well Grad Prep Programs help students both stay strong in their faith and know what to expect in the months ahead.



In many ways, it is the overall framework and structure of a program to equip our grads that I am proposing. As we explore this structure together, I will primarily describe what we do and encourage others to utilize the same essential framework, but encourage great freedom to customize their approach in their own setting. Hopefully, the rationale for this framework will be found transferrable and helpful to support students as they truly grow in owning their faith.

This is connecting the dots in community *while* they are with us so that as they are absent in the next season of life, they will be ready to connect the dots in a new community in their new setting! In multiple ways, we communicate the great need for fellowship for all of us – and then challenge them to connect to a personal, growing relationship with Jesus shaped in community with others. If we truly want to no longer imagine a finish line of faith at graduation, then it is vital to shift the perspective of how we have been doing church to better equip our students, their families, and our congregations to inspire faith that lasts.

### **Hosting the Right Conversations**

The first essential of a Grad Prep Program relates to hosting the right conversations to inspire faith ownership in the midst of community. It is important to remember that this is not just about the right content, but is also about the right environment. I have been intentional about the word “host” because it has the connotation of establishing a welcoming atmosphere as just as vital as the details of the conversations that will happen there. Parker Palmer declares, “A learning space has three major characteristics, three essential dimensions: openness, boundaries, and an air of

hospitality.”<sup>105</sup> This is a perfect introduction of – and even provides an outline for – an effective Grad Prep Program.

An air of hospitality sets the tone for the growth to happen. As David Kinnaman points out, this generation has been so influenced by a culture that affirms “open-mindedness, tolerance, and acceptance” that it is clear that “areas of common ground” must be established in such a way that their real-life engagement to faith can happen.<sup>106</sup> What I love about Palmer’s balanced approach is that it includes the kind of openness that leads to healthy common ground, but also distinguishes some boundaries and expectations for ongoing growth as well. These boundaries give guidance to the topics that the curriculum needs to include to be most helpful for our grads.

While the following list is not exhaustive, this list illustrates many of the subjects that should be covered in a Grad Prep Program. It really is impossible in a project of this type to go into great depth on every one of these details, so it will suffice to point to this content as an essential checklist of matters to discuss. It should be expected that these conversations help students:

- Explore developmental issues of belonging, identity, and autonomy
- Understand their faith in Jesus Christ as one that gives meaning and purpose to life
- Articulate their faith with confidence in real-life scenarios
- Continue to grow in the spiritual disciplines of prayer and reading of scripture
- See the ways that their faith can shape their vocational/career choices
- Respond to tough moral choices
- Cope with the strong emotions of new-found freedom, loneliness, and stress that come with this season of life
- Find Christians friends and community as the most important first-step

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<sup>105</sup> Parker Palmer, *To Know as We are Known* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Pub., 1983), 71.

<sup>106</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 1457-71.

There are a variety of ways that these topics could be organized and presented, but these are the right kinds of conversations that should occur for our upperclassmen.

Any number of helpful resources could be used to properly coach students. Here is a brief overview of some of the strongest types of curriculum that I have discovered and utilized. The *College Life 101 DVD Series* by Ben Burns has been invaluable in effectively and creatively engaging students in these conversations.<sup>107</sup> Burns, who works for CRU (formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ), has an extensive history of working with college-aged students. He has constructed in his video seminar an excellent workbook that challenges participants to process their thoughts on the same kinds of topics listed above.

In a similar vein, *The Sticky Faith Teen Curriculum* by Kara Powell and Brad M. Griffen also thoroughly covers many of the basics in practical and thought provoking ways. Also using video, this resource sets the stage for teens to have great dialogue and even begin setting faith goals for their next season of life. Other excellent resources would be *How to Stay Christian in College* by J. Budziszewski and *Make College Count* by Derek Melleby, as well as the many books listed in the literary review chapter of this paper. I am continually impressed with the list of additional ministry aids that are being produced by the *Sticky Faith* group. Many of their articles and videos are even available for free online. Other ministries that strive to support the right kinds of conversations include Vibrant Faith, which is a team that is continuing the work based on the Exemplary Youth Ministry project (found at [www.vibrantfaith.org](http://www.vibrantfaith.org)). Jeff Schadt at the Youth Transition Network has also developed great information for both students and

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<sup>107</sup>Ben Burns. "Grad Guides," College Life 101, <http://collegeprep.org/college-life-101.html>, (accessed May 26, 2015).

parents (found at [www.ytn.org](http://www.ytn.org)). These are just a few resources that should be considered in crafting the conversations for a Grad Prep Program.

As a church employs this kind of material in their program, everyone should be reminded that content itself cannot create change. Content shared in the right kind of learning context with the expectation that students are reflecting together with each other – and providing mutual accountability for each other – will help inspire the kind of faith ownership that we would hope for. Last, because we have heard over and over that the first few weeks of college truly “set the trajectory for the next few years,” these right conversations are affording them the chance to create a “strategy” to cope with the intense transition to come.<sup>108</sup>

Another excellent resource to discuss with students during the spring of their senior year is a tool called “College Church Connection” (found at [www.collegechurchconnection.org](http://www.collegechurchconnection.org)). After taking a short survey which highlights some of their preferences for a faith community and worshipping experience – as well as the name of the college they have selected – the ministry team at College Church Connection goes to work to help match them with potential campus groups or area churches for them to visit when they first land at their college. In the pilot year of their project, they had researched “34 colleges and interviewed 480 college ministry directors and college-town pastors” with the result being that “80 percent of the students contacted who received a College Church Connection report have found a church and a campus ministry they love!”<sup>109</sup> These reports are tailored in such a way that a youth pastor, parent, or another

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<sup>108</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2592-97.

<sup>109</sup> College Church Connection, <http://www.collegechurchconnection.org/about/>, (accessed May 26, 2015).

adult mentor can talk through their options before they arrive on campus and help them set goals about landing well.

I know for a fact that many of these “right conversations” don’t necessarily seem that earthshaking or revolutionary in the moments we are together while the upperclassmen are part of the Grad Prep Program, but I have heard from several students that these conversations have echoed in their ears and hearts when they were finally faced with the challenges of college – and in those moments these students could assess some important wisdom and encouragement to stay strong.

Perhaps the most impactful guidance that I try to reinforce in our grad prep conversations was first conveyed by Ben Burns in his *College Life 101* seminar. I clearly remember his talking about specific goal setting before you arrive on campus. Here is the short “to do list” as he presented the following challenge:

- Day 1 on campus: Tell someone you are a Christian.
- Week 1 on campus: Visit at least one campus ministry group or nearby church.
- Month 1 on campus: Make a commitment to some sort of Christian community, even though it won’t be perfect.<sup>110</sup>

It is ironic that our students often report about the difficulties of finding a new faith community with these words: “It just isn’t like at home.” The reason I find that so funny is that most of the students I have had as seniors and juniors who have stayed active in church often complain incessantly about the shortcomings of their home church and how much they can’t wait to get away and try something new! Obviously, even our “faith family of origin” does much by way of setting our expectations of Christian community,

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<sup>110</sup> Ben Burns, *College Life 101 Seminar*.

worship life, preaching, etc. as we grow up. Hosting these kinds of conversations in advance of their departure is a central task of a robust College Prep Program.

### **Creating the Right Relationships**

The second essential element of a Grad Prep Program relates to creating the right relationships of support to illustrate what connecting the dots in community can look like for them now as a model to re-create during the next season of their lives. Certainly, this will be formed and exercised intentionally as key links of their constellation. While they will be experiencing other relational connections in the wider church, their nuclear family, and youth group times, for the purposes of Grad Prep two core relationships that will be highlighted.

Larry Crabb describes the relational nature of our spiritual life as “soul care (which) requires two kinds of relationships: spiritual friendship and spiritual direction. Both exist only as part of spiritual community.”<sup>111</sup> These are two most important types of relationships that will be intentionally fostered in a Grad Prep Program. First, “spiritual friendship” will be developed with an accountability partner who is truly a peer committed to mutual encouragement as both young people walk their faith together. Second, “spiritual direction” will be established through specific mentoring avenues, either as a small group leader or prayer partner who commits to consistent discussions about the young person’s spiritual journey. As discussed earlier, true fellowship is a deep-seated need that most of us experience only rarely – and most often without much intentionality. But soul care must be purposefully attended to. David Kinnaman writes, “The good news, however, is that the church is uniquely called to be the community of

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<sup>111</sup> Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing Group, 1999), Kindle locations 332-37.

God— and true, authentic community banishes isolation, loneliness, and alienation and replaces them with love. What will have to change about how we ‘do ministry’ to meet the needs of the ‘new normal’?”<sup>112</sup>

Within this Grad Prep Program, one key way we are changing how we do ministry is to set out specific expectations around what it means to practice authentic community. It means doing life together up close and personal in particular ways that go beyond just an aspect of a program! It looks like exercising a profound commitment to one another by way of accountability. Sometimes in Christian circles, “accountability” has become a bad word – and assumes that positive life-change comes through legalistic manipulation or guilt. Within the context of true reciprocal relationships modeled on the life of Jesus, however, this couldn’t be further from the truth! As Joseph Myers points out poignantly, faithful accountability isn’t about “record keeping” of our sin, rather “in the spirit of organic community” it is all about “grace, not law.”<sup>113</sup> Accountability is all about what we call being a “safe, spiritual friend.” Brian McLaren describes this concept by summarizing:

So here we are, with two unacceptable alternatives. On the one hand, we have safe people who don’t have much to offer their friends spiritually, and on the other, we have spiritually knowledgeable people who aren’t safe to talk to, because they will come on too strong. Can you see why I feel we have to create a new term like “spiritual friendship” to try to explore a third option - becoming a friend (not a salesman) who is truly spiritual, safe to talk to, and worth talking to?<sup>114</sup>

More than just being worth talking to, we are making incarnational the spiritual promise of Jesus from scripture: “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I

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<sup>112</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 749-51.

<sup>113</sup> Joseph Myers, *Organic Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 137-38.

<sup>114</sup> McLaren, *More Ready than We Realize*, Kindle locations 463-68.

with them” Matthew 18:20, (NIV). When grace prevails along with a commitment to friendships that are both safe *and* spiritual, Jesus himself shows up and is present in the depth of sharing and encouragement for our faith to grow.

This is at the core of creating the right relationships in a Grad Prep Program. It is vital that specific training for our students spells out how this is practiced in our relationships both with peers who serve as accountability partners and other caring adults who serve as mentors to us. Within our relational constellations – just like constellations in the night sky – some stars shine brighter than other and are more prominent in shaping the overall constellation. These brighter stars are normally designated as “alpha” stars in the overall scheme of the constellation.<sup>115</sup> Our safe, spiritual friends are most definitely used by God to be alpha stars for us on our spiritual journey! As we experience grace-filled accountability, our faith connections with others truly become formative. Bonhoeffer writes, “In the presence of another Christian I no longer need to pretend. In another Christian’s presence I am permitted to be the sinner that I am, for there alone in all the world the truth and mercy of Jesus Christ rule.”<sup>116</sup>

But this kind of spiritual transparency doesn’t happen on accident. As trust is built and this model of safe, spiritual friendship is embraced, several layers of mutual support can be lived out. Scripture illustrates the impact of just such relationships in the following ways:

- “As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.” (Proverbs 27:17, NIV).
- “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Proverbs 27:6, NIV)
- “An honest answer is like a kiss on the lips” (Proverbs 24:26, NIV)

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<sup>115</sup> Charles Q. Choi, “Star Facts,” Space.com, <http://www.space.com/57-stars-formation-classification-and-constellations.html>, (accessed May 24, 2015).

<sup>116</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, vol. 5 of *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996), Kindle locations 2445-46.



In our specific trainings about accountability (which happen each year during a fall retreat which commences the program for our juniors and seniors), we simply ask the students, “When it all hits the fan and things get tough, who are you going to call? Who will be your ‘3 a.m. friend’ that you can turn to no matter what?” This is why safe, spiritual friendship is so important to our lives – and to this Grad Prep Program. Because we need, especially during times of crisis and transition, a trusted and faithful (not just loyal, but “full of faith” in Jesus Christ) companion to walk with us as we grow through the hard times. Practicing safe, spiritual friendship is one of the core competencies that we are equipping our students with as we prepare them before graduation. Having a “bosom friend” – as the Puritans called it – is one of the most powerfully formative relationships that a person can invest in.<sup>117</sup>

Another layer of mutual support in relationships of accountability relates specifically to confession. Scripture is clear that we exercise our spiritual muscles in this way.

Is anyone among you in trouble? Let them pray. Is anyone happy? Let them sing songs of praise. Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:13-16, NIV)

Confession is linked to healing by James and should be seen as much, much more than just a sacramental practice in the Roman Catholic Church. We are all called to experience the graceful forgiveness of Christ not as a solo endeavor, but in the context of

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<sup>117</sup> Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), Kindle locations 806-809.

community. Bonhoeffer again illustrates the influence that true confession with another can have on our faith when we move beyond “pious spirituality” to authentic fellowship:

Those who remain alone with their evil are left utterly alone. It is possible that Christians may remain lonely in spite of daily worship together, prayer together, and all their community through service— that the final breakthrough to community does not occur precisely because they enjoy community with one another as pious believers, but not with one another as those lacking piety, as sinners. For the pious community permits no one to be a sinner. Hence all have to conceal their sins from themselves and from the community. We are not allowed to be sinners. Many Christians would be unimaginably horrified if a real sinner were suddenly to turn up among the pious. So we remain alone with our sin, trapped in lies and hypocrisy, for we are in fact sinners... You cannot hide from God. The mask you wear in the presence of other people won't get you anywhere in the presence of God. God wants to see you as you are, wants to be gracious to you. You do not have to go on lying to yourself and to other Christians as if you were without sin. You are allowed to be a sinner. Thank God for that; God loves the sinner but hates the sin.<sup>118</sup>

As we are transparent and open to trusted friends, we quickly find that we are set up to really grow spiritually. When I take off my mask and get real with another who is also getting real with me, spiritual transformation happens. I can personally attest to this truth. I have been meeting with the same accountability partner for nearly twenty years and our pattern of consistent and committed depth of relationship has been used by God to also deepen my personal walk with Jesus.

It has been my experience that in the midst of safe, spiritual friendship, we don't need to fear accountability. Parker Palmer speaks to this exact fear when he writes, “Our hearts have been deformed by our lust for power, by our fear of mutually accountable relationships, by our self-destructive tendency toward an alienated life... We must practice disciplines that permit love and truth to re-form our hearts.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, Kindle locations 2434-37.

<sup>119</sup> Palmer, *To Know as We are Known*, 108.

“Heart reform” is a beautiful way to articulate the ongoing discipleship that we experience in truly growing in a personally owned faith in the context of significant connections with other believers. In our Grad Prep Program, we use a variety of ways to define healthy accountability. Jerry Bridges defines such mutual accountability as the “willingness to be both checked on and challenged in agreed-on areas of one’s life” such spiritual goals and places of weakness.<sup>120</sup> Jonathan McKee makes an excellent point when he asserts, “Accountability doesn’t mean changing our role from encourager to parole officer. This means continuing our role of encouragement, mixed with a good balance of tough questions.”<sup>121</sup>

For both the accountability partner and supportive mentors, boundaries and expectations need to be established to guide this delicate balance of encouragement and exhortation. In the Grad Prep Program, we ask students to commit to practicing regular meetings (at least once a month in person) with a spiritual friend who is a peer to pray with each other and discuss spiritual goals. We are also trying to use the youth ministry’s small group format to be a place where an adult leader can be a spiritual director to give another place of specific support as the student prepares to graduate with a strong faith.

While there is much more to be explored in terms of best nurturing these kinds of relationships of accountability, we would summarize our overall objectives of creating the right relationships in the Grad Prep Program as practicing safe, spiritual friendship while we are still in high school so that our students have the capacity to initiate and establish just such relationships for themselves when they are on their own after

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<sup>120</sup> Bridges, *True Community*, Kindle locations 863-70.

<sup>121</sup> Jonathan McKee, *Connect: Real Relationships in a World of Isolation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle locations 2131-33.

graduation. They are trained to no longer be in hiding in the faith journey through the practice of confession. They are trained to “care enough to confront” so that their partners are not hampered by their blind spots and stuck in self-destructive behaviors. David Augsburger explores the real reward of such “care-frontation” by declaring:

Truth with love brings healing. Truth told in love enables us to grow. Truth in love produces change. Truth and love are the two necessary ingredients for any relationship with integrity: love— because all positive relationships begin with friendship, appreciation, respect; and truth— because no relationship of trust can long grow from dishonesty, deceit, betrayal; it springs up from the solid stuff of integrity...Confrontation plus caring brings growth just as judgment plus grace brings salvation.<sup>122</sup>

The kind of growth that can happen as we receive “grace-full” confrontation and offer “hope-full” confessions to each other in key friendships sets the stage for future growth in relationships down the line because we have practiced it with our students while they are still in the structure of our youth group and Grad Prep Program.

The message that they need to hear over and over is this: you will be creating your own relational constellation in the season after high school graduation, either by default or design! If there is no intentionality about relationships when landing on campus in college (or in the barracks during boot camp or in the workplace), then relational connections will simply form organically and potentially without any regards to ongoing faith growth. Take a look at the updated diagram below and consider the reality I drive home to students in our Grad Prep Program: “You will create your own relational constellation in the season after graduation, *either by default or design!*” Remember, for children in the first phase of life, parents have been the ones who have taken the responsibility for connecting the dots with key adults to play a role of support for their

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<sup>122</sup> David Augsburger, *Caring Enough to Confront: How to Understand and Express Your Deepest Feelings Toward Others* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2009), Kindle locations 308-315.

children. During the next phase of life, wise churches follow a “sustainable youth ministry” model to help connect adults to students in their programs and construct a model of mentoring throughout their experiences. For the phase beyond high school graduation, the construction of a constellation of support falls to the student herself. Without the efforts of some sort of grad prep conversations, who will communicate the realities of this challenge to our students? All of those boxes with question marks will either be safe, spiritual friends and mentors that a student has set out to form an intentional connection – or it might just be the first people to pay any attention to them in the dorm. Obviously, it will be some kind of mixture of both.

## The “Constellation” Model in 3 Phases

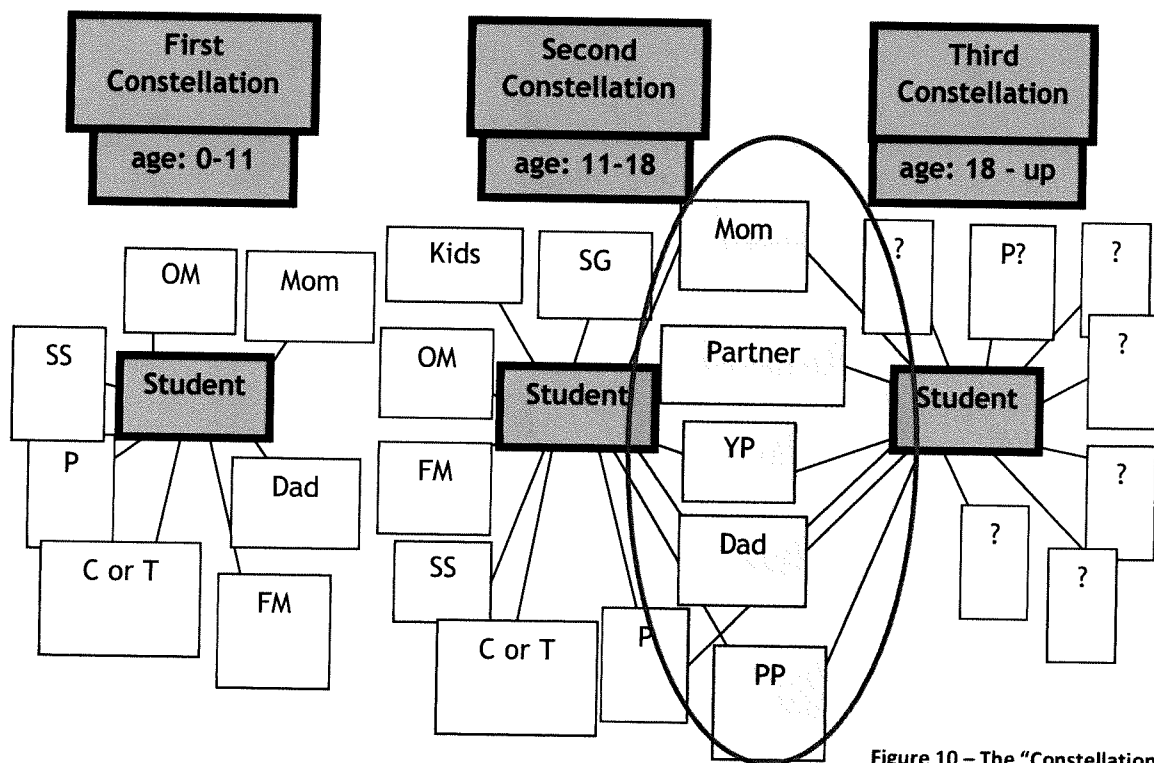


Figure 10 – The “Constellation” Model in 3 Phases

**Grad Prep Program Outlined:**

During a student's junior and senior year, she or he will be invited to participate in a Grad Prep Program which will include committing to:

- participate in monthly training meetings (which rotates a curriculum in a two year cycle),
- join an annual retreat in the fall to kick off the program and teach specifically about accountability
- meet face to face with their accountability partner to check in between monthly meeting
- discuss the constellation model of community that shows support and encouragement
- being linked with a congregational prayer partners who will pray for students during this season and beyond

A Grad Prep Program should be....

- Structured enough to
  - Communicate a commitment to their long-term faith
  - Set a pattern of upper-class discipleship (juniors/seniors)
  - Establish a consistent group training time (monthly)
  - Involve both teaching and conversation
  - Teach them about initiating Christian accountability
  - Help them craft a vision for owning their faith and creating their constellation
- Flexible enough to utilize a variety of curriculum

Figure 11 –Grad Prep Program Outlined

Certainly, God can and will use random divine appointments to help form amazing friendships that last a lifetime and encourage our faith, but a major thrust of the Grad Prep Program is to help students see that by creating the right relationships on purpose when their mommies, daddies, and youth pastors are not there for them, they will be providing themselves with the kind of constellation that will help them stay strong in their faith. Time and time again during this season of preparation, our students need to recognize the long-term call to connect the dots in community.

Related to this important discussion is this amazing quote by the actor Will Smith: “The best thing that anybody ever said to me is that you’re only as good as the people you associate with. Look at the five friends that you spend the most time with—that’s

who you are.”<sup>123</sup> Young people are wise enough to realize that there is great power in relationships – either to support our ongoing growth toward our life goals or to derail us in negative ways. Our students are no strangers to peer pressure and other dynamics of relational influence, so we can utilize the constellation model to present them with a vision for intentional support for the future.

The oval in the previous diagram represents the season of preparation that our upper classmen have prior to graduation. And it also represents some of the most significant relationships that want to be there for them as they are equipped for the challenges ahead. One area that needs more attention in our present Grad Prep Program relates to the role of parents during this time of preparation. While we have done some seminars for both parents and upper class students in dialogue with each other in the same setting, we have only begun to envision crafting more specific activities to amplify these potential resources. We must always be reminded that parents are the most motivated parties to see their children grow in healthy ways into the future, but they often just don’t know how to best engage their role in nurturing spiritual preparedness. Jim Burns recounts:

Parents and significant adults play an important role in the faith development of adolescents. We can no longer allow the Church and the family to assume that their tasks are mutually exclusive. The youth worker’s role as an equipper must focus on parents as well as teenagers because both live in a relationship together. In a society that continues to put stress on the traditional family structure, the youth worker must remain committed to recapture the family as the context in which faith is primarily formed.<sup>124</sup>

Our Grad Prep Programs must take into account our equipping role to families and discover powerful ways to encourage both the parents and the students to see that some

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<sup>123</sup> Derek Melleby, *Make College Count* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Kindle locations 753-55.

<sup>124</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 45-46.

of the right relationships that are best suited to inspire and support their ongoing faith are in their own homes.

### **Practicing the Right Habits**

The third essential of a Grad Prep Program relates to practicing the right habits to assist students to grow in key competencies so that they continue such disciplines when they are out of their homes, churches, and youth groups. From the outset, our programming must determine the outcomes of our habits and practices. With such goals in mind, some of the important habits that are to be encouraged by their participation in the Grad Prep Program are about taking the initiative relationally and developing as a disciple. The following is a brief synopsis of some of the skills to be strengthened. These skills aim for specific outcomes of involvement, encourage relational initiative in students as they develop as disciples.

### **Outcome-Based Programming**

From the start, we must communicate that every discipline and habit we are seeking to develop has an end-goal in mind, an outcome we are trying to achieve. Again, the priority of articulating a strong message with vision and mission statements can provide a target for the outcome of our youth ministry. In our setting at Longview Community Church, the following are the key outcome statements of our “Plugged In” Youth Ministry. (The name of our program itself was created by students. This is just another way we are trying to respond to the fact that “people own what they help to create.” Students also helped design the logo below.)



Our Vision

*(what we want to see happen as  
God moves in our ministry):*

*Connecting as a Family  
Focused on Jesus*

Our Mission

*(why we exist as a ministry):*

*To safely meet kids where they are  
and help them take the next step of  
Christian faith by partnering with  
families to send faithful kids out  
into the world.*



Figure 12 - Longview Community Church Youth Ministry Logo

For us, then, our outcomes are truly accomplished when students report that they are experiencing family-like connections (sounds like *koinonia*, right?) in the midst a journey of personal growth and faith ownership. From a programmatic perspective, if we “send faithful kids out into the world” as students strongly committed to a personal walk with Jesus in the midst of Christian community and equipped to keep growing, then our ministry programs have been used by God to produce the right kinds of outcomes! An excellent list of other ministry specific questions that have everything to do with what we want our student to “become” by the time they graduate is found in David Olshine’s book *Youth Ministry, What’s Wrong*. He uses the following from Jason Lamb of Grace Fellowship Church. Olshine reports:

An excellent example of how this is lived out practically in ministry is from Jason Lamb (who)...argues that most youth ministries rarely think through what we want students to know and do by the time they graduate. He has taken time with his team to ask five hard questions:

- What does a student who graduates from our student ministry look like?
- What have they accomplished and done?
- What content have they been exposed to? (What do we want them to know?)
- What experiences do we want every student to have access to?
- What do we want them to be and do fifteen years from now?

A healthy youth ministry will ask, “What are we trying to do with these students?” by the time they graduate. What will they be like? What do we want them to know? What are the intended outcomes we desire for our students?<sup>125</sup>

In a similar vein, Strommen and Hardel challenge the entire church (and not just the youth ministry) to consider, “What do you wish for your children and grandchildren when your congregations’ Christian education program for them has ended? What are the outcomes you desire for your children?”<sup>126</sup> It is sad how little strategic consideration we have given to these questions, because they really should be at the core of our ministries.

I have often reflected on my role in the life of a young person in terms of a faith cheerleader on the front lines *with* the student and his family. Through all the highs and lows of life – with spiritual mountaintop experiences and mundane boredom, I get the privilege to simply be with these young friends during this season. So as I show up to that student’s graduation party (and I am presently entering this very season as I write this chapter), I love when I get to say the following conversation to the grad’s mom and dad.

“I am so proud of your student! He has grown so much spiritually while in our church, youth group, and in your home. I know for a fact that you have modeled real faith to him, especially during the tough seasons. And I am confident that he is personally responding to following Jesus and is learning to own that faith. He has demonstrated that he is committed to continuing in his relationship with Jesus in the midst of a community with other believers. He has told me that he understands that during this next season of life, he must take the initiative to connect the dots in community for himself and we have had some great conversations about where he might find a good campus group or church near his college. He has some great tools to keep growing in his devotional and prayer life, keep celebrating his giftedness in practical ways of service, and share his faith with others. It has been a privilege to walk beside him – and you as his family – as he has been prepared for this transition. Well done, my friends. I think he’s ready!”

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<sup>125</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong*, Kindle locations 2269-80.

<sup>126</sup> Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 104.

Obviously, this doesn't come out like a canned speech, but I am most excited when I have the opportunity to share the genuine blessing of these sentiments. This does not mean that we are finished with our support of this student and his family, it only recognizes that we have done our best to be faithful (a better ministry word than "successful") in our role of spiritual nurture during this season of preparation. This kind of attention to considering the outcomes of our ministry must be one of the habits that we establish as a church and help our families consider as well.

### **Relational Initiative**

Another important habit that we want to strengthen for our grads is the ability to initiate relationships with key adults in their lives. If ultimately we want our students to take the first step to reach out to potential mentors and accountability partners on their own in the season after graduation, we must give them the practice of doing so while they are with us in our churches and youth groups. In many ways, this can be accomplished with relative ease if we are intentional.

Consider this example: Many youth groups recruit adult prayer partners from the church for special events like youth mission trips. This past year, we recognized that with the slightest adjustment to this plan, we could build up an essential competency in our students by making the students themselves reach out to adults that they admired in the church and requesting that the adult adopt them as a prayer partner. At first, this seems like the smallest thing, but really we are giving them the chance to be successful with a key relational task in a relatively safe setting. If they have had practice doing this during their high school career, they will have more confidence to be bold when they are on their

own and they know that most adult mentoring connections will only happen if the student makes it happen.

Another aspect of relational initiative deals with helping students with developing faith conversations with their parents as they prepare to transition out of their home. We have used seminars and workshops to provide a common ground and comfortable setting for this kind of dialogue to happen. I have had parents beg me to provide a “grad prep” course for *them* because the transition is as difficult for them (in different ways) as it is for their student. By providing such avenues, we can effectively prime the pump for more such conversations to happen in their homes during their high school years. While we are far from having an overall plan for these conversations, we have used topics like technology, purity, and college prep to create an environment where parents and students are facing each other and discussing faith.

For the parents themselves, we have also tried to provide a variety of resources to assist parents in initiating these faith conversations themselves, as well as better understand youth culture and issues. In addition to some of the organization already listed in this paper (*Sticky Faith*, *Think Orange*, etc.), there are countless other ministries that are seeking to support such faith nurture. Here are some of the resources I point parents to:

- Homeword ([www.homeword.com](http://www.homeword.com)) – resourced by Jim Burns and others
- The Center for Youth/Parent Understanding ([www.cpyu.org](http://www.cpyu.org)) – provides amazing support on topics that include transitioning to college from Walt Mueller and others
- Vibrant Faith ([www.vibrantfaith.org](http://www.vibrantfaith.org)) – builds upon the work of the Exemplary Youth Ministry project.

As part of our Grad Prep Program, an important habit to cultivate is extending such resources to both students and their parents so that greater relational connections can be fostered.

### **Discipleship Development**

An additional habit that we want to strengthen for our grads is the ability to consistently develop spiritual disciplines that encourage and deepen their personal walk with Jesus. We want them to know what it means to be a disciple, a follower of Christ, and what it means to keep growing in that journey. It is vital that this effort be grounded in grace and not simply hammer them with a “to-do list” of behaviors that might look good from the outside, but not necessarily lead to a deeper relationship with God.

In the Great Commission found at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus calls his disciples to “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20, NIV). Obviously entire libraries of books have been filled in trying to establish what it means to “make disciples,” however for our purposes presently, the following habits should be customary features in a Grad Prep Program that is essentially synonymous with upper-class discipleship.

As discussed with the Swirl, every follower of Christ has a next step in her faith. We must always remind our students that the core of our faith is a love relationship with Jesus Christ and that any efforts we make to grow more deeply in this relationship must be grounded in love and not obligation. Our “restored relationship of love with God through Jesus Christ is more than a means to another end; it is the primary and

foundational goal of spiritual growth.”<sup>127</sup> Loving God because “God first loved us” is the goal of our discipleship (1 John 4:19).

As spiritual growth becomes part of their routines during high school, students are setting a pattern of faith to continue beyond high school. The authors of *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* note, “We know that the true test of a youth ministry’s effectiveness is the impact that it has on the faith and practice of young people...When youth were specifically asked about the impact that their involvement in youth activities had on their religious faith, they responded positively. Their involvement deepened their relationship with Jesus and their understanding of the Christian faith, and helped them apply faith to their daily lives.”<sup>128</sup> Again, from an outcome based perspective, it is the reinforcement of this kind of faith that is understood and practiced in every day ways that will give them confidence to continue to live in such a way after graduation.

Spiritual disciplines such as prayer and scripture reading should be encouraged during the Grad Prep Program, yet always within the context of grace. Richard Foster brings a refreshing reminder to all of us who are often so self-critical of our spiritual life when he reflects, “What I am trying to say is that God receives us just as we are and accepts our prayers just as they are. In the same way that a small child cannot draw a bad picture so a child of God cannot offer a bad prayer.”<sup>129</sup> Our primary nudge to our students should be “Don’t stop drawing pictures! Don’t stop praying prayers!” Considering both their prayer life and some sort of devotional direction to engage Bible reading in some

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<sup>127</sup> Thomas R. Ashbrook, *Mansions of the Heart* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), Kindle locations 696-97.

<sup>128</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 2153-62.

<sup>129</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992), 8-9.

sort of frequent way, we should help create habits that are constantly affirmed and reinforced as faithful habits of loving God back.

I don't think that we can point too much or too often to God's grace when it comes with this challenging time of transition for our students. In many areas of their lives, they feel like failures and disappointments, so we need to let our theology of grace drive our practice of spiritual disciplines. The Apostle Paul writes, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Ephesians 2:8-10, NIV). If our students grasp grace and the fact that they are God's masterpiece (and still a work in progress), they will have hope for their faith as they ultimately struggle (as we all do). N.T. Wright articulates:

That is a picture of how God's grace works. God loves us as we are, as he finds us, which is (more or less) messy, muddy, and singing out of tune. Even when we've tried to be good, we have often only made matters worse, adding (short-lived) pride to our other failures. And the never-ending wonder at the heart of genuine Christian living is that God has come to meet us right there, in our confusion of pride and fear, of mess and muddle and downright rebellion and sin.<sup>130</sup>

Wright then continues to again demonstrate that our faith journey is a process (a la Max Lucado). The both/and of grace and discipline can be a reality for our students, but we cannot tire of accurately communicating this balance. Wright reinforces, "There is the sequence: grace, which meets us where we are but is not content to let us remain where we are, followed by direction and guidance to enable us to acquire the right habits to replace the wrong ones."<sup>131</sup> The authors of *Sticky Faith* are quick to remind us that when

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<sup>130</sup> N. T. Wright, *After You Believe* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2010), 62-63.

<sup>131</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 63.

we lack an accurate picture of the gospel of grace, we set our students up for great discouragement. What they need is a real and true experience of the unfailing acceptance of Jesus Christ and not a “Red Bull” gospel (that energy drink that has no substance and leads to a crash) or a gospel of “sin management” that depends on what they feel like that day.<sup>132</sup>

With grace as a firm foundation, their overall involvement can include other key habits. Jim Burns says, “The cure for apathy is involvement. The road to involvement is often slow— and even painful— but it’s worth the price. When students feel cared for, have meaningful responsibilities and begin to use their gifts of service in the church and the community, then they’re more likely to remain in the church permanently.”<sup>133</sup> Using their gifts in service is one key aspect of spiritual disciplines. First, it reminds students that they are indeed gifted by God to be a gift to others. Also, it puts them in places where they have to humbly rely on God’s strength to be of service to others. Last, by stepping into student leadership roles, they are not only “owning” their ministry, they are being built up to better “own” their faith. Burns again reflects:

The only way for them to grow in ministry and leadership is to let them lead with you. Some youth workers have made the mistake of believing that releasing ownership means handing over the reins with no development. That’s simply not true. Our job is to equip and empower our students for ministry. The only way to do that is to give them responsibilities that matter and to empower them to carry out those tasks.<sup>134</sup>

A couple of years ago, a youth team that participated in the Student Leadership Conference hosted by Doug Fields actually offered a workshop that was entirely student-led. All twenty of our students had a role in the workshop, either through presenting a

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<sup>132</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle Locations 342-58.

<sup>133</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 117.

<sup>134</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 118-19.



part of the content or being in a humorous skit. They constructed their speech around a ministry metaphor discussed in *Consuming Youth*, where a range of student involvement and maturity was outlined. This metaphor challenges us to “rethink ministry activity by involving youth in the planning of all activities and moving youth programs from a marketing orientation to one of transformation.”<sup>135</sup> The goal is to move students from one end of the range (“Youth as Consumers – if we build it, they will come—and then we can grow”) through a middle space (“Youth as Asked – if we inform them of options, they will provide feedback—and then we can serve them better) to the far end of the range (“Youth as Empowered – if we partner with them in every segment of ministry, they will recognize need and response options—and then we can consciously put more and more decisions in their hands and facilitate their leadership).<sup>136</sup> The best part of their preparing such a presentation is that they truly *believed* what they were sharing and then were so committed to the model that we returned from that trip and began incorporating this kind of planning in our own ministry.

By being intentional about including such habits within both our Grad Prep Program and over all youth ministry, we are practicing excellent habits of discipleship that actually put many adult believers to shame! And with such care given to the formation of faith, the character and integrity of each student is being encouraged as well.<sup>137</sup> Grace-full discipleship is reiterated in multiple places in multiple ways. “God loves you just as you are, but he loves you too much to leave you there.” Henri Nouwen puts this reality of our faith in the most beautiful terms. We both *are* the Beloved and are

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<sup>135</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2354-56.

<sup>136</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2357-60.

<sup>137</sup> Wright, *After You Believe*, 29.

*becoming* the Beloved! <sup>138</sup> Presently, our identity is defined by the unmerited love that our heavenly Father has for us. “See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!” (1 John 3:1a, NIV). And yet, our ongoing identity is still being shaped and formed by our habits. God is inviting each of us into a relationship where the fullness of our belovedness can either be aided or hampered by the habits of our life. By encouraging students to take such habits seriously, we respond to Nouwen’s challenge: “Becoming the Beloved means letting the truth of our Belovedness become enfleshed in everything we think, say or do.”<sup>139</sup>

### **Our Format for a Grad Prep Program**

The last essential of a Grad Prep Program relates to simply understanding a format for grasping some of the key elements of a specific Grad Prep Program and considering the ways that each church might tailor their program to their unique setting. Much of this format has been surveyed above; however, for the sake of providing a concise overview, here are the prerequisite components of a holistic Grad Prep Program.

First, an effective Grad Prep Program should be structured enough to accomplish several key goals. Since it is built upon the assumptions portrayed in this entire thesis, it should communicate a commitment from the church and youth ministry to the long-term faith of the students. The structure of this program will then set a pattern of upper-class discipleship for juniors and seniors in high school with the hope that we should have higher expectations of students who are staying involved in our ministry. These opportunities prepare them to keep their faith after graduation as a way to deepen their faith ownership while in high school. Truly, if we expect our older high school students

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<sup>138</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1992), 38.

<sup>139</sup> Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved*, 39.

to stay active, we must approach them differently than the younger students who are involved. With so many options and growing responsibilities (jobs, cars, academics, etc.), I believe our juniors and seniors will only stay plugged in if they are nudged to take their faith deeper through programs like Grad Prep or other student leadership roles.

The structure of a strong Grad Prep Program then establishes a consistent group training times, in our case meeting monthly, to host the right conversations and create the right relationships to encourage their faith vitality. These settings will best equip our students if they involve both teaching and conversations about the topics covered. In each of our training times, we strive to have specific accountability partners process these issues together as part of their ongoing discussion. During these training times, we also continue educating students about healthy Christian accountability and give tools for students to improve their conversations and sharpen their spiritual friendships. Again, another level of relational support will be included in this structure by partnering an adult member of the congregation who will pray for the student during their high school career and one year beyond.

The final part of the structure deals with helping students craft a vision for owning their faith and creating their own constellations after graduation. The vernacular of connecting the dots in community and the ministry models of the swirl and constellation will become second nature to these students as these lessons are reinforced in multiple ways. The overall curriculum for a good Grad Prep Program has to be flexible enough to utilize a variety of curriculum to best suit the specific ministry context of each church and youth ministry. Again, some of the most helpful resources have been listed above.

For churches who wish to discover their own unique recipe for a Grad Prep Program, many crucial ingredients have been discussed. The greatest encouragement that I would offer is that if your congregation desires better for their students, something is better than nothing, so get started! To best answer the question, “Where do we go from here? How do we get started?”- here are some fundamental ideas to ponder:

- Get people discussing the “black hole of church attendance.” (Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*)
- Ask about the ways you are preparing our students to graduate with strong faith?
- Ask your students about their sense of a “network” of support.
- Have former students come back to your church and talk about faith in college.
- Evaluate the ways that you help adults connect across generations in your church.
- Read up on these issues from some of the great resources that are out there.
- Take baby steps toward being more intentional about connecting the dots in your church.

It’s never too late (or too early) to get your church talking about this time of transition and all of the significant ramifications that we have been reflecting on in this paper. In my own setting, we are discerning our next steps of our program to keep building on the foundation that we have started.

### **Next Steps:**

It has been important to think through what kinds of next steps are in store for both the Grad Prep Program and our congregation because of the work of this project. As a way of outlining initial steps, I will cover both some of the venues where I have been blessed to present this project and the summary of two research tools that have been created to appraise the specific efforts our congregation is utilizing to address the issue of fading faith among our graduates.

### **Next Steps: Presentations**

It has been fulfilling to share the vision of such a program both within our congregation and at outside ministry opportunities. Internally, people have been engaged in participating with me and my writing on several levels. The Youth Committee has been a faithful testing ground for many of the concepts found in this paper and has helped me process some of the critical programmatic elements. As this thesis began to take its present form, I presented at an open meeting with youth ministry leaders, parents, and church board members in the Spring of 2013. Gathering feedback from such invested supporters, I have constantly been encouraged to continue updates with the wider church. In May of 2014, I shared a summary of my ongoing thesis work for the church's Board of Directors. Then in February of 2015, I was invited to introduce these ideas at our church's monthly Women's Fellowship Luncheon. In each of these settings, I appreciated the feedback and even pushback that I received to make my communication more clear and helpful.

External to our own congregation, there have been a few opportunities that I have taken to share this ministry vision and receive helpful critique. Within my own city, I received great affirmation and encouragement from the Youth Pastors Roundtable, a network of over a dozen youth workers who meet twice monthly to provide support and prayer for each other, as well as to work together on some combined city-wide events. These women and men truly have nudged me forward to better shape structure for supporting faith after high school. This past year, I partnered with two other churches in providing the Grad Prep Program as a city-wide partnership, which even included doing a retreat together. These have been great seeds of support among youth ministries in our town.

In January of 2015, I was invited to be a guest lecturer at OneLife, a gap year program hosted at Lancaster Bible College, in Lancaster, PA. The outline of this thesis was the core of the teaching content for those three days and I loved the engagement that the thirty college-aged students brought to these topics and discussions. It appears that the directors of the program found it helpful as well, since I will most likely teach again next year.

In March of 2015, I presented "Connecting the Dots in Community" as an outline of the Grad Prep Program at the Northwest Ministry Conference in Seattle, WA. I had about twenty people in attendance and very much enjoyed the dialogue during the seminar. This was truly the first time that I had revealed the content of this thesis to ministry peers that were mostly strangers to me! And while I know that many of the concepts were still in "rough draft form," I received some very encouraging affirmation from participants in the workshop. One friend who did attend passed on the following observations:

Sorry for my delay. I was hoping to find my notes from your seminar. And when I find them -- and I will -- I can send you more specific feedback. There are, however, three things I remember well from your seminar.

First, you did a great job of giving an overview of Sticky Faith and other books on this subject. And you presented these resources in a way that encouraged people to go read them. You didn't bring them up simply to confirm what you were saying.

Second, I remember you asking this question: "Do students know their need for fellowship?" It's a simple question and a basic need, but I don't think most students have ever considered it. And if they did acknowledge their need, it would lead them to seek fellowship in college instead of waiting for others to choose their community of friends for them. This is huge!

And, third, the image that sticks in my mind from your presentation was the photo of teens with the Xs over their faces. I remember thinking, "I can't believe Chris

had the courage to draw on their faces like that!" And yet, that is exactly what we are talking about here. We are losing most of our kids. And those who want to sugar-coat the problem will say those kids will come back to the church and a community of believers when they get married or when they have kids, but the statistics don't show that -- at least to an extent that we can relax. Loved the photo!

I went to another seminar that weekend on this topic that was depressing because the presenter seemed to have no hope. Chris, you have such an outgoing personality and a great sense of humor. It's amazing how you can present a serious problem but call us to action and give us hope (and tools)! Great presentation, friend.<sup>140</sup>

I am so grateful for the last line of her note – because if we cannot speak with *hope* as we address the challenge of lost faith after graduation, then there is no reason to speak at all! In all of these various settings, I have valued the chance to bounce my ideas off of people who are wrestling with some of the same concerns and see that there is great energy present within my own congregation and the wider church as well to see coordinated efforts in this area produce something better for our graduates.

### **Next Steps: Research**

Beyond just talking about the program, I have also developed two survey tools to measure the environmental health of our own congregation as well as a Grad Prep Program specific survey to evaluate what the lasting impact of that program is in reality. While the results of these surveys will be covered in the next chapter, a brief synopsis of these two surveys will be offered here.

### **Next Steps: Research Tool #1 – “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey**

This research tool was designed with the goal of seeking to measure the general sense of health and vitality of youth ministry within our congregation in two different

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<sup>140</sup> Sherri Nee, email message to the author, May 15, 2015.

ways. First, there will be some specific programmatic evaluation that can be compared to previous surveys taken within the church over the past couple of years, as well as gauging the level of congregational ownership there is in the articulated vision of our youth ministry programs.

Second, a very thorough faith asset assessment developed by a group that conducted the Exemplary Youth Ministry project is included in my survey to judge the overall sense of support for youth ministry within the church. The target audience for this survey is everyone in the church, both young and old. Such a faith asset model (as mentioned earlier) is very accessible to the wider church and I believe we will find some areas of great affirmation for the wider church, as well as some areas that still need improvement. The EYM approach is so comprehensive that people can truly see exactly how the assets are “cumulative (and) build on each other (with the overall goal of getting)...everyone involved: the congregation, leaders, families, and young people.”<sup>141</sup> I believe there will be much fruit from this effort for the congregation.

#### **Next Steps: Research Tool #2 – “Ready or Not” Survey of Recent Graduates**

This research tool was designed with the goal of seeking to measure the difference that a “college/grad prep” program makes with our graduates. By comparing two test groups (“prepped”=GP students and “non-prepped”=NP students), the conclusions of this study can be used to improve the grad prep process in our setting. The survey itself has two primary targets, summed up in the following questions:

- What difference does being part of a “college/grad prep” program make in helping students stay strong in their faith after graduation? (With which I will try to measure the degree or “strength of faith” of students by using ten “faith concern” questions.)

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<sup>141</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1151-52.



- What difference does being part of a “college/grad prep” program make in helping students know what to expect related to their faith after graduation? (With which I will try to measure the “level of expectation” of students by asking how their initial months after graduation related to their expectations.)

This survey must be taken by at least twenty students who have been part of some sort of “prep” experience and at least twenty students who have not had any specific “prep” training. I hope to not only measure the difference between the two test groups, but also use the overall scores of the students to evaluate which areas of faith might be better covered in future teaching sessions.

With these initial next steps in place, the work of this project can begin to be tested and assessed. The problem of students graduating from their faith demands that proposed solutions be processed among other peers who are doing similar work in ministry, as well as be quantified through appropriate research methods. I trust that as further steps are taken – and evaluated in the following chapter – the final recommendations will be found worthy of wider consideration among those struggling to shift the perspective to find solutions to this problem of lagging faith.

### **Conclusion: Part of Something that Supports Students to Live for Christ**

The failed experiment of the Era of Youth Ministry illustrated what can happen when congregations do not maintain strong youth groups. Young people need to be part of a subculture that supports them in their decision to live for Christ. They need a place where they can feel free to explore the issues they face as Christians. They need to develop strong friendships rooted in faith. They need to feel supported in their efforts to be part of the mission of Jesus Christ. A Christian youth support group is an aspect of congregational life that youth need.

– Merton Strommen and Dick Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*

Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives’ tales; rather, train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come. This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance. That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things. Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the

believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching. Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through prophecy when the body of elders laid their hands on you. Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:7-16, NIV)

If I were to personally try to describe what fully fledged faith ownership looks like in the midst of Christian community, the above quotes list many of the basics: living for Christ, developing strong friendships rooted in faith, being trained up for godliness, and setting an example of the life-changing difference that trust in Christ makes. And there is found an emphasis that it takes a lot of work (devote yourself, don't neglect your gift, persevere) to continue to stay part of something that supports us to live for Christ.

As we conclude our assertion that the solution to the problem of faith loss after high school is found in shifting the perspective within our churches to a new kind of ministry vision, I affirm this great conviction: when our churches, families, youth ministries, and students themselves work intentionally to connect the dots in community, I believe that Jesus "shows up" in their midst. And I believe that we need these kinds of tangible experience of God's presence in our lives through other believers being present to us. Only then can we have hope that we are not alone in our journey of faith.

Early on in my ministry career, I went with friend to a monastery in Northern Utah for a mini-retreat to restore my spiritual batteries. Holy Trinity Abbey in Huntsville has been my spiritual renewal place since I was a teen; it is full of memories and God-moments that have refreshed me. During this particular season, my friend Jace and I (both youth pastors) arrived totally spent after a loaded summer of activities. We headed up to the monastery for fresh bread and honey, as well as the quiet of the mountains.

Something was calling us. Our only agenda: to get rest. We didn't even call ahead, we made no plans for a meal, and we certainly were not expecting to have a divine encounter with Boniface.

Brother Boniface was a Trappist monk who had been mentoring a pastor-friend of mine. I had met him on a couple of occasions prior to this trip, but I wouldn't consider him a friend. As we made our way up Ogden canyon, we had no idea what lessons we would soon learn this day.

The early fall sun made us very sleepy, so Jace and I walked up the hill to the barn and took a late morning nap on the bales of hay. The stress and knots in both my back and mind had been slowly unwinding even as we drove up the highway into the mountains. Now I felt unclenched and open, able to breathe again.

After our nap, we entered the monastery chapel before worship. The guest master invited us to join several other visitors to lunch (remember, we came unannounced!). We were grateful for their over-the-top hospitality. There is something very powerful about sitting in on the monks as they chant the Psalms. They gather for community worship seven times a day, starting at 3:30am. We quietly entered and kept taking deeper and deeper breaths. We were beginning to feel refreshed.

For some strange reason, after the short service Brother Boniface left his seat in the choir and walked right toward us, then past us, motioning us to follow him into a side room. It was as if he had been expecting us, as if we had a scheduled appointment.

We entered a little office and he said he remembered that we were Pastor Tom's friends and were in ministry. Boniface was a man with intense blue eyes, nearly 75 years old. His name didn't really fit him, though. "Pretty face" in Latin, this man's whole

demeanor was made rough by years of hard physical labor and spiritual, prayerful labor. He was used to working hard with his hands and praying hard on his knees. I found out recently that “Boniface” actually means “doer of good” and so it was a perfect name for our monk friend.

He inquired about our work in youth ministry. He listened with those intense eyes and nodded along as we talked about what it was like to pour out in youth work, to the point of feeling empty.

I’m not sure what I was expecting; maybe some fatherly guidance or words of encouragement, but he mostly just listened and told us to keep up the good work. Then, Boniface abruptly stood to his feet and blurted out, “I have to go and take my nap so that I am not grumpy at the other brothers later!” He motioned for us to stand, taking our hands as we joined together in a small circle. He prayed for us with great affection to a very personal God.

Then it happened. After his “amen,” he turned to me. With his hand, he made the sign of a cross on my forehead. “In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.” And then his intense glare was fixed on me. “Bless me! Bless me!” he appealed. I stumbled though the words, awkwardly making my own cross on his bare forehead. “In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Grabbing my hand, he took it to his lips and kissed my knuckles. “I have met him!” he declared. I was stunned; shocked silence is the best description. Turning to Jace, he repeated this litany and quickly left the room. Both of us collapsed in chairs, trying to figure out what just happened, looking for a category that even describes it.

As I look back on that experience, Boniface was living out what we say that we believe. Christ truly is in us, the hope of glory (Colossians 1:29). When we meet another, when we serve another, we serve Christ (Matthew 25). This memory serves me as an intense reminder that something mystical happens when we gather in community. Christ is literally in our midst (Matthew 18:20). But if we lose our sense of connection with others in our community, from where does the reminder come? Who is there to take my hand, to give a kiss of blessing? I need someone to declare, "I've met him! Jesus is here!" And I believe we all do.

These kinds of tangible experiences of Jesus in the midst of community can happen in our churches and in our families, in our youth groups and in our friendships. When the environment of a committed congregation is sold out to be there for their kids, the adults of all generations see their engagement as essential.

Recently, I was thinking about how much I love to ask the grandparent folks of our church about their grandkids that live out of town. Often, these grandparents sadly report that their relatives are not involved in youth group or church anywhere. Almost always, grandma will then say, "But I'm praying for them."

Certainly they are praying for their grandkids to make connections and grow in faith whether they live in Phoenix or Dallas or Boise, far from the Pacific Northwest. So here is how I respond: "I'm so glad you are praying for them. Here's another thought too....have you ever wondered that you may very well be the answer to someone else's prayer?" I continue, "Maybe there's a grandma in Sacramento who is praying for her grandkids in our hometown. Perhaps that young person might show up to a youth group event or a worship service or...? And perhaps God will use you to help be part of the

constellation for this young person....maybe even be used by God to lead them to own their faith?!?!?" WOW!!

So many of the older generation are accused of saying "been there, done that" about serving the younger generation. But I think the pressure is on our churches to articulate a vision of getting their hands dirty by caring about a young person in our community...truly an "answer to that other grandma's prayers."

By deep investments in creating a church culture where parish and parents work together to support students, everyone is invited to make a practical connection in the lives of the children of the congregation. Constellations are sketched not by the mere presence of stars in the sky, it takes someone to specifically *show others* how the connections can make a picture – to connect the dots – to give them a vision! And as this vision comes together, our youth ministry programs are properly focused on their long-term goals and grad prep, as parents are empowered to play their part, and churches are committed to widespread support of just such a vision, community is found. And as community is found, I believe that faith for our students has a greater chance of *staying* found. All of this takes a great deal of diligence and devotion, as well as a significant shift in ministry perspective. But how can we *not* consider as churches, parents, and youth workers the great and hopeful opportunity that is right before us if we connect the dots in community.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### NEXT STEPS TO INVEST: LAUNCHING FAITHFUL STUDENTS FROM A FAITHFUL MINISTRY

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. (2 Peter 1:3, 4, NIV)

“Everything we need...” As we begin to consider next steps to invest as churches and caring adults in the lives of our children, do we really believe this guarantee? Are we able to wrap our heads around the fact that God’s “very great and precious promises” include inviting us into a life-giving community *together* with people of all ages and calling us to participate with the very Spirit of God as well? So often we become overwhelmed by the challenges in our broken world. I believe our teens are in a state of being constantly overwhelmed. They so need to hear these graceful promises of God from a multitude of adults who model this kind of trust in God. Once we start clinging to these promises, we are set to grow in our faith.

For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins. (2 Peter 1:5-9, NIV)

Peter is quick to let us know that growth in our faith also takes work. “Make every effort...” Now, we must remember that the core of our faith is fully based on a heart response to God’s unconditional grace and love. There is nothing that we can do to

work for or earn our salvation. (Ephesians 2:8-10) However, we are invited to participate in the work that God's Spirit is doing in and through us. We are called to grow! This growth is a life response to all that God has done for us. When we stop growing, we become "blind" to all of God's blessings upon us. We become forgetful of the forgiveness he has showered on us. But Peter sees a process of progress, of building up our faith in myriad ways so that we can be effective and productive as followers of Jesus Christ. This means fully owning our faith in such a way that it permeates every corner of my life. But Peter doesn't stop there.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things. (2 Peter 1:10-15, NIV)

Peter's great affection for his young flock is evident here. Peter himself is "making every effort" to drive home the importance of confirming our calling as beloved children of God. Peter declares, "Don't give up working on your faith and growing in your conviction as a child of the King!" He is confident that these disciples have heard and been "firmly established" in the truth of the gospel. The great task of his life (as he seems to be contemplating his own death) is to "refresh" the memory of his young friends so that they will be able to "remember" the promises of God, even after Peter is gone.

It seems to me that Peter would make a pretty faithful youth pastor!

In all seriousness, as a youth pastor myself, I think that Peter has set an excellent pattern for us to follow as we strive in our churches and families to launch faithful



students into the world as confident missionaries ready to keep growing in their faith. It takes people like Peter, a community full of Peters, to create a ministry that is faithful in its own calling to be that kind of launching pad for our young people.

But in the face of a world “infused with palpable loneliness,” how can our young people respond to the promises of God if we don’t make every effort to out-shout the hurt and aches of their lives?<sup>1</sup> We have some stiff competition in a world where emotions run wild and choices are often based on feelings and not faith.

In fact, it has been said that we live in the “age of sensation.”<sup>2</sup> In so many ways that is such an accurate account of this era, especially for adolescents. Complicated by all of the factors highlighted in this project, young people are blown about by every wind and wave. (James 1:6) They have been very much shaped by doubt. Doubt pervades their lives. (“*Will my parents stay together?*” “*Will my future hold much opportunity?*” “*Will God really be there for me?*”) Researchers say that most Christian students of course struggle with doubts about their faith, but very few feel free to talk about these doubts with the adults in their lives.<sup>3</sup> And so their isolation is made all the more lonely as they struggle on their own.

Peter is preaching about facts of faith, not feelings. What would it look like for us to have the same kind of conviction for the young believers in our midst that we want to encourage? Could we be both safe enough for our young people to approach and strong enough to challenge them that there is more to life than just feelings? “Speaking the truth

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<sup>1</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 2659-61.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2000), Kindle locations 421-423.

<sup>3</sup> Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 2221-28.

in love” is a skill that we must master to do this well, if we want to grow to maturity.  
(Ephesians 4:15)

Eugene Peterson profoundly quips, “Feelings are great liars. If Christians worshiped only when they felt like it, there would be precious little worship. Feelings are important in many areas but completely unreliable in matters of faith. Paul Scherer is laconic: ‘The Bible wastes very little time on the way we feel.’”<sup>4</sup> And yet we today waste much time with our feelings. Even the problems raised by this thesis could quickly devolve into emotional “the sky is falling” kinds of apprehensions, not without merit but potentially without balance or advantage.

For the students whom we want to inspire to own their faith and grow in the context of Christian community, we must send the clear message of the fact of God’s love for them in their journey. We must be people who will constantly restate that truth – perhaps even as all of us who are prone to wander – and declare that there is more to life than just our feelings. Consider the powerful way Henri Nouwen articulates this task:

How do we get in touch with our chosenness when we are surrounded by (feelings of) rejection?...Keep unmasking the world about you for what it is: manipulative, controlling, power-hungry and, in the long run, destructive. The world tells you many lies about who you are...(so) dare to say to yourself: ‘These feelings, strong as they may be, are not telling me the truth about myself. The truth, even though I cannot feel it right now, is that I am the chosen child of God’...Keep looking for people and places where your truth is spoken and where you are reminded of your deepest identity as the chosen one...Keep celebrating your chosenness constantly. This means saying “thank you” to God for having chosen you, and “thank you” to all who remind you of your chosenness.<sup>5</sup>

Places and people that remind you of your chosenness....that sounds like youth ministry (actually, the church) at its best! We can (like Peter before us) be incarnational reminders

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<sup>4</sup> Peterson, *A Long Obedience*, Kindle locations 418-420.

<sup>5</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1992), 49-50

of God's grace and truth to the next generation. We can caution our young friends to not put too much stock in how they feel about how the world feels about them, but instead celebrate the fact of their chosenness constantly. To reinforce the sentiment, Bernard Bush reflects, "I hope it is clear that feelings of guilt, accompanied by anxiety, fear and restlessness, arise from deep within ourselves are not an accurate gauge of the state of our souls before God. We cannot assume that he feels about us the way we feel about ourselves, unless we love ourselves intensely and freely."<sup>6</sup>

In a society that has so marketed to our young people "from the moment they are born" and is manipulating every consumeristic urge to unbelievable proportion, for many young people such unconditional acceptance seems like a fairy tale, not a fact.<sup>7</sup> But we can embody the reality that young people are cherished by Jesus by cherishing them too.

In the face of the cultural approach to adolescence that repeatedly communicates that they are not worth much – unless they are being useful consumers or overproductive performers – I believe that we are called to the work of communicating the great value each child has in the eyes of God and God's people. God can use the church to help heal the broken perspectives of this age (like Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, consumeristic Christianity, etc.). And as we help heal some of the damage done, we are restoring our calling as Christian community committed to our young people and their families, ready to create faithful ministry to launch faithful students into the world.

There is much conversation about the culturally antagonistic attitude about adolescence in the modern era. Kenda Dean highlights this catastrophe by stating, "To

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<sup>6</sup> Brennan Manning, *A Glimpse of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2003), Kindle location 132-34.

<sup>7</sup> John Berard, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett, *Consuming Youth: Navigating Youth from Being Consumers to Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 31-33.

treat adolescents as a separate species instead of as less experienced members of our own was one of the twentieth century's largest category errors."<sup>8</sup> And so we have separated from our young people in many ways in society, including in the church. Joseph Allen and Claudia Worrell Allen further criticize the mistaken thought that most teens don't desire strong relationships with adults as "perhaps the single most damaging belief we hold about adolescents today."<sup>9</sup> But now we must concede that we have been misguided to swing the pendulum too far to separation. In fact, Jim Belcher declares, "age segregation impoverished both individuals and the community"<sup>10</sup> But have we gone too far to go back?

Significant rites of passage in our culture have shifted to getting your first cell phone or the legal age of creating a Facebook page. No wonder it is difficult to put our finger on when a child is now to be considered an adult. Chuck Bomar reflect on the tremendous shift in the past fifty years. He writes:

Historically sociologists have said that the transition to adulthood is made after: finishing school, moving out of the home, being financially independent, getting married, having a child. When all five benchmarks are passed, sociologists suggest a person has officially entered adult life. It's interesting to note that in 1960, 77% of women and 65% of men had passed all these milestones by the time they were 30 years old. By 2000 these numbers had dropped to less than half of women and only 33% for men.<sup>11</sup>

With this new age of "adulthood," we must recognize that things are different than they were in generations past.<sup>12</sup> There has been unprecedented world-wide change in the

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<sup>8</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle locations 1278-81.

<sup>9</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 742-746.

<sup>10</sup> Jim Belcher, *Deep Church: A Third Way Beyond Emerging and Traditional* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), Kindle Location 274.

<sup>11</sup> Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle Locations 199-204.

<sup>12</sup> Bomar, *Worlds Apart*, Kindle Locations 294-95.

past century, so we need have appropriate expectations of – and do our best to understand – young people today.<sup>13</sup> Still, their relational needs are not any less. In fact, because of these changes, they are more relationally hungry than ever before, often only one or two significant steps away from “falling over the edge” into literally being at-risk!<sup>14</sup>

In many ways this generation is lost between never growing up and growing up too quickly. Their lives are radically expanding in both directions, as the authors of *Consumer Youth* report, “toward childhood (age compression) and toward adulthood, meaning it’s now a ten-, fifteen-, or even twenty-year experience increasingly detached from any connection with the adult world. The resulting expansion and vagueness of the adolescent experience creates an increasing void during those years that will be filled.”<sup>15</sup> And so what will they fill this void with? Can we step in to this gap and make any kind of impact?

The Church can be the Church! We can help them respond and awaken to their need for fellowship (remember the words of Paul Tournier) – both with God and with others. And then as ministry practitioners, we could take seriously our task to connect the dots in community with the greater goal in mind: to launch faithful students into the world. Jim Burns clearly explains, “One of the major goals of youth ministry should be to move the students from dependence on us— the youth workers— to dependence on God. Yet we need to remember that the process takes time.”<sup>16</sup> Yes it takes time – but *now* is the *time* for the church to step up!

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<sup>13</sup> Bomar, *Worlds Apart*, Kindle Locations 347-48.

<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 1021-24.

<sup>15</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2295-2307.

<sup>16</sup> Jim Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001), 7.

The remainder of this chapter is crafted to illustrate a holistic picture of becoming a faithful ministry ready to launch faithful students by taking next steps to invest. We must begin with a review of a vigorously communicated congregational vision to connect the dots in community. This will be followed by a research report of surveys conducted in my specific ministry setting. Finally, four distinct next steps to invest will be proposed as ministry recommendations for my home church to consider. From a Christian perspective, success is measured by faithfulness. So becoming a ministry that faithfully connects the dots in community in such a way that we launch faithful students who own a long-lasting faith – that is the goal we seek to accomplish.

### **Becoming a Faithful Ministry**

If GOD doesn't build the house,  
the builders only build shacks.  
If GOD doesn't guard the city,  
the night watchman might as well nap.  
It's useless to rise early and go to bed late,  
and work your worried fingers to the bone.  
Don't you know he enjoys  
giving rest to those he loves?

Don't you see that children are GOD's best gift?  
the fruit of the womb his generous legacy?  
Like a warrior's fistful of arrows  
are the children of a vigorous youth.  
Oh, how blessed are you parents,  
with your quivers full of children!  
Your enemies don't stand a chance against you;  
you'll sweep them right off your doorstep. (Psalm 127, The Message)

There are so many aspects of this scripture that paint a picture of faithful ministry! First, the vital reminder that it is God who ultimately builds things! Certainly we have a role to play, but unless our ministry is led by God, our labors most surely will be in vain. Next, it is so important to be fearless as we discuss the impending transitions of our

students beyond high school because God is the one who ultimately guards them. Then comes the truth about our children – they are God’s best gift! As parents and as a church family, our children are God’s legacy in our lives, like arrows in our quiver ready to fly.

What would it look like to “draw a picture” of the family-based illustration of this Psalm? Could we use it as a holistic model for our churches to visualize the different elements that are needed to become a faithful ministry that is prepared to launch faithful students into the world? I believe we can! Like arrows aimed at a target, our goal is to fully equip our students to fly from their homes, ready for the transition ahead without graduating from their faith. If the young person herself is the arrow, then the momentum and motion of her faith is guided by the practice of a personal faith ownership that has been inspired by her family and her home church. And the ongoing direction is to continue to follow Jesus toward maturity as she soars. While there is definitely much about our personal faith journeys that are unique and accomplished on our own, the task of this thesis is to stimulate a vision of our ongoing faith story always linked to other believers in community, perhaps like an arrow that is tied to a string. It has its own trajectory and path to take, but it is never truly alone.

And so the image of this community is a quiver, the setting of the wider church family that is full of arrows. Within this context, our students learn to anchor their faith in Christian fellowship, their corporate faith formed by true *koinonia*. They have practiced connecting the dots in community and recognized they have a constellation of encouraging support that is there to nurture and guide them. It is in this environment that they are shaped for the launch ahead by a healthy church culture that is committed to invest in them. They have had an experience of confident family faith as parents cultivate

and make spiritual support a part of their own home life. Throughout their time spent in youth ministry, there has been a focus that is continually reminding them that they are being readied for maturity and ongoing growth. And as sort of guide on the bow itself, an intentional Grad Prep Program has equipped them as the archer pulls back the string. God himself is our archer, wanting to set each of us on a trajectory of faithful living.

This holistic picture is really a summary of much of what has been reported throughout this thesis. For the balance of the paper, a thorough evaluation of my present ministry context at Longview Community Church will be conducted. Specific research will be reported and recommendations presented to determine the best way to share this emerging vision and practically live out our calling to be a faithful ministry that launches faithful students.

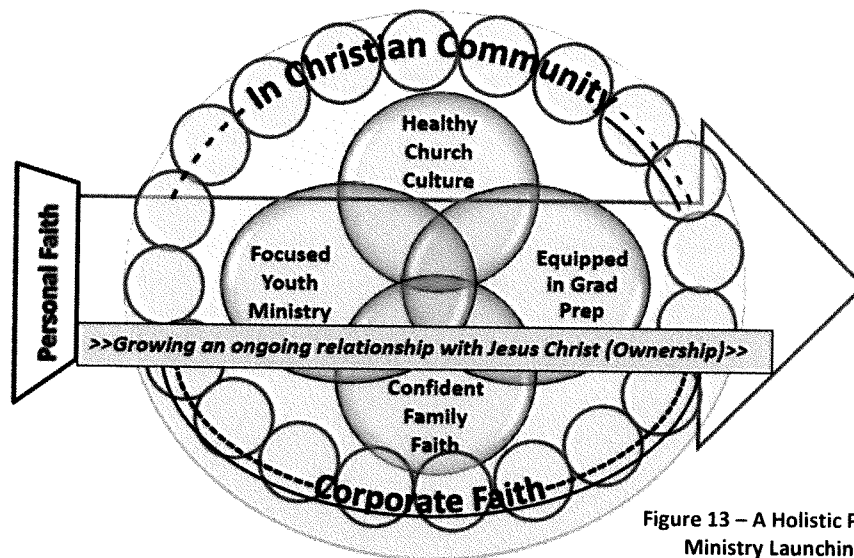


Figure 13 – A Holistic Picture of a Faithful Ministry Launching Faithful Students



## **Part I: Reporting the Research**

I'm excited to report that within the research segment of this project, there is a great deal of openness in my home congregation (and among our recent graduates) to be about the business of connecting the dots in community and investing in a congregational commitment to launch our students faithfully beyond high school. As the details of this research are explored, it sets the stage for more thorough recommendations to be offered in my specific ministry setting. My research is contained within two separate surveys that have been conducted over the past few months. In order to report most clearly, the research has been organized in the following five segments.

- 1) **Survey Description:** This will provide a short sketch of the survey in a general way. The overall goal of the survey will be shared here with certain desired results included. It will list the number of questions, both quantitative (which can be scored numerically using scaling questions) and qualitative (which are more "open ended," fill-in-the-blank type responses).
- 2) **Participants:** This will let you know the specific audience that I was targeting with this survey. As much as possible, I will include demographic information. While in some ways it is very difficult to get a specific number of people recruited for these surveys, I will review some overall demographics about our youth group and church so that you can get a sense of the return rate of the surveys.
- 3) **Procedure:** This will examine how I recruited participants and the avenues I used to seek their input. Additional details about process will be summarized regarding what information they were given before they took the survey and formal requirements (like the informed consent statement).
- 4) **Results:** This segment will assess the scores and feedback of the surveys in detail. Observations of the specifics of how participants answered will be followed by attention given to patterns or trends that are helpful to mention.
- 5) **Conclusions:** These are the interpretations of the results and some estimation about what the data means. The ministry recommendations that are to follow will be based in part on these conclusions.

## **Research Report: “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey**

### Survey Description: “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey

After reviewing several different models of church-wide evaluation tools to gauge the openness of my congregation to more fully engage intergenerational ministry as outlined in this project, I decided to employ the Faith Assets Assessment. This tool was used in the Exemplary Youth Ministry Project and highlighted in *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*. The following is a synopsis of the research report and conclusions drawn from the research. This report will provide a narrative overview of the goal of the study, some general information about the study, overall summary of the findings of the study, and a final assessment. More details about the specifics of this study are available in the Appendix.

The goal of the “Plugged In” Youth Ministry survey was to measure the health of the congregational environment (“spirit and culture”) of Longview Community Church as a whole as it relates to nurturing and encouraging the faith of individual students who grow up in their midst, as well as the level of commitment and support for our emerging model of sustainable youth ministry. (Just as a reminder: “Plugged In” is the name of our Youth Ministry at LVCC.) There are two sections to this survey:

- SECTION 1: Seeks to discover the general sense of the vitality of youth ministry (with some comparison of previous surveys taken), as well as measure how faithfully we have communicated the vision of “Plugged In” Youth Ministry to the wider church.
  - Three quantitative scaling questions were utilized from the outset. For the first question, it is a repeat of an exact question that was asked in a survey twice before. This will allow us to compare the different feedback during different seasons of our youth ministry program.
  - Also, three qualitative questions (“fill-in-the-blank”) were used to receive general feedback.

- **SECTION 2:** Seeks to evaluate the Faith Assets present at Longview Community Church. Using a tool based on the work of the Exemplary Youth Ministry Project (EYM), we can assess and discuss our congregation's impact on young people. By analyzing both our stated *priority* of these faith assets and how people view our effectiveness in actual *practice*, we will be able to affirm our strengths and see areas for growth and improvement.
  - There are 44 different faith assets and thus there are 44 quantitative questions in this section.
  - Each question asks participants to respond to both the *priority* of that faith asset in the church, as well as their impression of how effective the church is in the actual *practice* of that faith asset.
  - These questions are scaling questions on a five-point scale (1=weak, 5=strong).
  - These 44 faith assets are also categorized in four different spheres:
    - Congregational Faith and Qualities, Youth Ministry Qualities, Family Faith Qualities, Leadership Qualities (Lead Pastor, Youth Pastor, Youth/Adult Leaders)

#### Participants: "Plugged In" Youth Ministry Survey

This survey was taken by 112 people over several weeks in February and March, 2015. The hope was to have youth, parents, and all adults in the congregation participate in the survey.

<b>Answer Choices:</b>	<b>Responses: 98 answers</b>
<b>A 6<sup>th</sup> – 8<sup>th</sup> Grade Student at LVCC</b>	<b>5 % 5</b>
<b>A 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Student at LVCC</b>	<b>15 % 15</b>
<b>A parent of a student at LVCC</b>	<b>41 % 40</b>
<b>Not a student or parent, but a caring, supportive adult at LVCC</b>	<b>16 % 16</b>
<b>Someone who would describe myself as "very involved" at LVCC</b>	<b>39 % 38</b>
<b>Other</b>	<b>9 % 9</b>

Figure 14 – Participants in "Plugged In" Youth Ministry Survey

At Longview Community Church, we worship with about 300 people on Sunday morning in two different services. In our youth ministry, we have about 60 active families and about 75 active students. Compared to other surveys taken in the past, I was encouraged by both the number of people who participated and their investment in giving written feedback as well.

#### Procedure: “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey

In an effort to recruit participants, a website link was sent out with the weekly emails for a month to the youth ministry roster (which includes most active leaders, adult prayer partners, parents, and students with emails). This link was also listed on the front page of the church’s website and posted on our Facebook page. Several verbal announcements were made during church services, as well as at our annual youth auction, which is one of our largest events of the year and has a very intergenerational audience. This survey utilized Survey Monkey to receive the responses and the responses were anonymous. There was a short summary at the beginning of the survey that explained the nature of this doctoral research and the goal of the survey work. It also included an informed consent statement and parent permission for minors to participate.

#### Results: “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey

After collecting the surveys and evaluating the responses, several findings emerged from the research. Below is a narrative of both areas of affirmation and areas for improvement. Listed first are overall reflections, with specific details relating to the sections to follow.

As an overall statement of affirmation, it would appear that there are many areas for great affirmation and encouragement. There is a tangible sense of congregational

support, excitement, and amazing potential for youth ministry to thrive in healthy ways at Longview Community Church. People affirm the support of strong leaders (both staff and volunteer), as well as a strong vision in the youth ministry program itself. There also appears an emerging excitement about greater intergenerational connections to experience a mutual blessing. Speaking precisely in terms of the Exemplary Youth Ministry project, LVCC has an overall very healthy environment to plant a sustainable model of youth ministry to support a strong and lasting faith among our students.

Next, there are some specific affirmations and findings within each of the two sections that deserve focused attention. Looking at the details of Section 1 (which seeks to discover the general sense of the vitality of youth ministry by doing some comparisons with previous surveys taken several years ago), several particular positive features are prominent in the research. Over the past four years, there is a growing confidence in the health and vitality of Youth Ministry at LVCC (as illustrated by the charts below).

<b>If the GOAL is to build a great youth ministry, how CLOSE is Longview Community Church to reaching that goal?</b>	<b>Feb/March 2015</b> <b>Responses:</b> <b>98 answers</b>	<b>February 2012</b> <b>Responses:</b> <b>62 answers</b>	<b>August 2011</b> <b>Responses:</b> <b>76 answers</b>
<b>We are ICE COLD (We are starting over)</b>	<b>0% 0</b>	<b>0% 0</b>	<b>8% 6</b>
<b>We are kinda COOL (We want a great youth ministry, but no plan)</b>	<b>0% 0</b>	<b>3% 2</b>	<b>42% 32</b>
<b>We are WARM (We have a plan for a great youth ministry)</b>	<b>10% 10</b>	<b>31% 19</b>	<b>39% 30</b>
<b>We are HOT (We are working the plan for a great youth ministry)</b>	<b>78% 76</b>	<b>60% 37</b>	<b>9% 7</b>
<b>We are ON FIRE! (Our plan for a great youth ministry is perfect!)</b>	<b>12% 12</b>	<b>6% 4</b>	<b>1% 1</b>

**Figure 15 – Measuring Confidence in the Health and Vitality of Youth Ministry**

Looking at the response, here is some additional information to put some context around the data. The first survey was taken in August 2011, prior to my arrival as new youth pastor. (Just a side note, I believe I was the 11<sup>th</sup> youth pastor/director in the last twenty years or so.) The second survey was taken in February 2012, six months after the new youth pastor and ministry team. The third survey obviously was part of the “Plugged In” Youth Ministry survey taken in February and March 2015. The responses to this key question are very encouraging.

In addition to this general sense of youth ministry vitality, there is also a great majority of people who have seen youth ministry growing in its visibility in the

congregation and doing a good job of communicating its vision and mission. This is also portrayed in the charts below.

<b>How familiar are you with our Youth Ministry Vision Statement: “Connecting as a family that focuses on Jesus”?</b>	<b>Responses: 98 answers</b>
<b>Very familiar (I could recite from memory!)</b>	<b>39% 38</b>
<b>Somewhat familiar (I know a couple of key words.)</b>	<b>30% 29</b>
<b>Familiar (It sure rings a bell.)</b>	<b>27% 26</b>
<b>Not very familiar (Don’t remember hearing this before.)</b>	<b>5% 5</b>

Figure 16 – Measuring Familiarity of Youth Ministry Vision

Lastly, people also reflect that they see other marks of vital ministry in our church. There is greater involvement in our church among students, strong leadership present and accounted for (paid and volunteer), an obviously welcome and safe atmosphere to help students “own” their faith, and intention given to focus on intergenerational efforts. The last chart listed below also gives a high grade for connecting the dots in community.

<b>We are very committed to building a relational network of supportive adults and peers for each of our students (called a constellation). From your angle, how do you think we are doing?</b>	<b>Responses: 96 answers</b>
<b>We’re doing Great! (I see strong connections being built)</b>	<b>38% 36</b>
<b>We’re going Well. (I see connections/relationships happening.)</b>	<b>51% 49</b>
<b>We’re doing ok. (There appears some connections/relationships between students and adults in our ministry.)</b>	<b>11% 11</b>
<b>We’re doing poorly. (I don’t see evidence of strong connections/relationships.)</b>	<b>0% 0</b>

Figure 17 – Measuring Success in Building Constellations

The content of this survey can be verified by much of the written feedback that was included in the first section of the survey. People were specific in their compliments and encouragement, as well as sharing a growing sense of excitement for the ways in which the youth ministry of LVCC was providing a catalyst for growth and energy for the wider congregation. Several themes emerged from this written feedback.

Responses to:

*“What is ONE thing that is RIGHT about our youth ministry?”*

There were 96 participants who offered written responses. The following key words/themes were present (and the frequency of these words showing up in written feedback in in parenthesis):

Key Themes (and frequency)

- “Involvement” (20 times present in responses)
- “Leadership” (13 times present in responses)
- “Welcome and/or Safe” (9 times present in responses)
- “Pastor(s)” (8 times present in responses)
- “Owning faith” (4 times present in responses)
- “Intergenerational” (4 times present in responses)

The following quotations best represent some of the key themes:

- “Excellent communication throughout each component of the ministry”
- “Whole church involvement”
- “We have a variety of activities to participate in from serve events, worship/deeper events, friendship events and gather/small group nights to encourage the students' growth in their relationship with God. As well as getting the students involved in the leadership and owning their youth group and owning their faith. “
- “The amazing adults that really take their time to be there for each student.”
- “(Getting) the kids involved in all facets of the church...leading worship, greeting in first service, setting up after church coffee hours and that's just a small example that I see...many activities and volunteering opportunities for the youth to help them grow in their spiritual walk, in my opinion.”
- “Making new people feel welcomed” (One respondent called it “Welcomeness”)
- “It isn't just a Sunday ministry. It is truly a "family". When a younger member of the church is struggling with anything, the first person they want to call for support is someone from within the church family. That allows whatever the issue may be to be addressed with someone supportive and also from a faith-based standpoint. You cannot get any more ‘right’ than that.”



- “All generations are involved.”
- “It is amazing how you can see the growth and the passion for Christ.”
- “The youth KNOW that it is THEIR ministry and there's a lot of ownership.”

Responses to:

“What is ONE thing that you would change about our youth ministry?”

There were 82 participants who offered written responses. The following key words/themes were present (and the frequency of these words showing up in written feedback in in parenthesis):

Key Themes (and frequency)

- “Nothing or n/a or can't think of anything, etc.” (10 times present in responses)
- “More connections and/or less cliques” (10 times present in responses)
- “Busyness and/or too many events” (3 times present in responses)
- “Improve youth room/facility” (6 times present in responses)
- “More youth in regular worship” (5 times present in responses)
- “More intergeneration connections and/or better connection with children's ministry” (5 times present in responses)

The following quotations best represent some of the key themes:

- “I don't know how one would even go about it, but it would be great if we could great if we could connect with the parents of the kids who don't go to church at all.”
- “Having the students actually use their Bibles more.”
- “Sometimes there are too many events in one month. Also encourage small group leaders and prayer partners, that are not already reaching out to their youth, to do so. Don't wait for a crisis to build a relationship with the youth, the "good kids" still need that connection.”
- “Noticing that people are feeling left out because they aren't in the clique”
- “More connections in the constellation”
- “Making connections with college students/checking in on them”
- “Develop a mentoring program of l=older youth and younger youth. (a bit like accountability partners used in grad prep) to improve connection and applying biblical learnings in everyday life”
- “More youth families connected into other church opportunities”
- “I'd like to see more students come to Sunday morning worship.”
- “More communication about how adults can be involved”

Responses to:

*"Please feel free to include any other thoughts/feedback that might be helpful to hear your heart and sense your dreams about our youth ministry. Thanks a ton! You are truly part of the "building up" of a stronger youth ministry in our church."*

There were 44 participants who offered written responses. The following key words/themes were present (and the frequency of these words showing up in written feedback in in parenthesis):

Key Themes (and frequency)

- *"Attracting and keeping youth & families (numeric growth)" (3 times present in responses)*
- *"Better faith development, Curriculum, and/or Youth and Church Programs" (8 times present in responses)*
- *"Connection and/or Cliques" (3 times present in responses)*
- *"Leadership" (5 times present in responses)*
- *"Students keeping their faith for the long haul" (5 times present in responses)*

The following quotations best represent some of the key themes:

- "My prayer would be for our ministry to continue to provide a safe place for all kids of the community to connect and to have a sense of family. Our focus on encouraging youth in their faith through worship, small groups and serving opportunities strengthens kids' spiritual muscles for the time when they move on. This is only done by all church family participation, not by 1 or 2 people."
- "Getting started on building 'niches' for those with other interests besides music, ie computers (make powerpoints for lessons), art (displayed throughout church), acting (church plays, youth group skits), etc."
- "Find ways that older adults can participate in youth ministry. We have lots of great ideas of how we can help each other in the ministry and in relationship to each other! We just don't have the energy for a lot of the current youth activities."
- "There are a ton of older people in the congregation that could give of their vast knowledge. We are a congregation with a huge mixture of professions and skills."
- "If our goal is to see students continue on in the faith after they leave high school, they need to be coming to worship with the adults. Most Sundays, I don't see very many (unless they are part of the service – like when they are reporting on their camp experience). I know many youth who were 'on fire' when they were involved in the many fun, crazy and inspirational youth events, but after graduation, the excitement isn't there and they often drop out of church."

The following quotations are general affirmations that were shared:

- “So happy that even kids who have graduated are still connected to each other! “
- “I appreciate your energy, process, and vision in support of our community”
- “This church is doing things the right way...It’s been a process over the past 3 years, but God is so good and the fruits of the labor are beginning to ripen!”
- “It is really inspiring to see their gifts being developed, their energy and love shared through many experienced as they mature in faith, growth and development in maturity.”
- “I personally love the way the congregation appreciates the youth in our church and support them. Especially our Sr. Pastor John Williams.”

It is obvious from these evaluations that there is both great hope and amazing opportunities present at Longview Community Church to further embrace a church-wide vision to connect the dots in community in support of our students owning their faith in the context of Christian community.

Even within those quotes that indicated an ache or a weakness in our congregation, there was a motivation for our church to thrive in healthier ways. Certainly it has been a refrain of this thesis that the healthy environment of the wider church is an essential aspect of growing a strong ministry for sustaining young people in their faith. After utilizing the EYM model and seeing the results of this survey, I have an even stronger conviction that our congregation is on the verge of taking tremendous steps forward to help our students stay strong in their faith as they transition from high school. It’s now time to turn our attention to the specific feedback from the EYM portion of the survey.

In discerning some of the specific affirmations and findings within the details of Section 2 (which seeks to evaluate the Faith Assets present at Longview Community Church using the EYM tool), there is great strength found in three of the four different spheres examined, as well as overall high scores for our church. In the “Leadership Qualities” sphere, there was seen an amazing strength from support by the lead pastor

and good strength from the support by the youth pastor. Regarding the “Youth Ministry Qualities” sphere, there is a noticeable excitement about youth involvement in the wider church and a good sense of health within youth ministry program structures and relational support. In the “Congregational Faith and Qualities” sphere, there were several solid categories listed by the survey respondents. It is within the “Family Faith” sphere that room for improvement is present (and this will be covered later).

Just as a reminder, the EYM Project is explored in depth in the book *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, by John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson.

Their research:

points to the value of a congregation’s culture endowed with a palpable sense of the living, active presence of God at work among the people of the whole congregation, its ministries with youth, its parents, the ministries of the congregation, and its congregational leaders (pastor, youth minister, youth and adult leaders) as providing the most powerful, pervasive influence these congregations have on young people long-term.<sup>17</sup>

They sought to define “exemplary congregations in youth ministry in terms of an observable end product: exemplary congregations in youth ministry consistently develop youth of vital, maturing Christian faith.”<sup>18</sup> The EYM team describe forty-four Faith Assets which present “a holistic, comprehensive, and research-based framework that congregations can use in developing and enhancing their ministries with young people and their families.”<sup>19</sup> This is exactly the goal of using the EYM material in this part of the research portion of this dissertation, to enhance and improve our present ministries. These Faith Assets are presented in four “spheres”

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<sup>17</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle locations 233-37.

<sup>18</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 433-35.

<sup>19</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 247-50.

- Congregational Faith and Qualities
- Youth Ministry Qualities
- Family Faith Qualities
- Leadership Qualities (Lead Pastor, Youth Pastor, Youth and Adult Leaders)

Before going into the specifics of the details of Section 2, additional comments regarding the “Faith Assets Assessment” (the title of this specific EYM survey tool) might be helpful. This tool asks respondents to measure both the *priority* and *practice* of the stated faith asset on a scale from 1 (Low) to 5 (High). One might consider the measurement of *priority* as the stated and articulated value of this asset in the congregation. Essentially, the survey is asking “How important is this issue to your congregation?” When looking at the *practice* of this asset, the actual effectiveness in terms of this asset is being measured. So, the survey is asking, “How well are we doing in reality related to this issue?” Therefore, this aspect of the survey assesses the following:

- Areas of Strengths and Areas of Improvement in *practice*
- Areas of Strengths and Areas of Improvement in *priority*
- An opportunity to evaluate the continuity between articulated *priority* and actual *practice*

Certainly this tool is simply just a snapshot of a congregation’s self-appraisal – and one might question how well the survey participants even understood the specifics behind these faith assets; however, for the purposes of this thesis, it is a very effective tool to evaluate congregation-wide issues that affect impact that a church can have on inspiring lasting faith.

In an attempt to best interpret the data from the EYM section of the survey, I reached out to “First Third” (an organization based out of Luther Seminary) which had been publishing and utilizing the EYM material. I was contacted by Dr. Nancy Going and have included our conversation here. Dr. Going works with “Vibrant Faith,” a ministry

that is continuing the EYM survey work (as well as other family faith initiatives). She shared that they use this tool with churches to be something that is more *descriptive* than *prescriptive*. Rather than using terms like “healthy” or “good and bad,” they counsel churches to reflect on how their assets point first to strengths and then to areas of improvements. In trying to leverage congregational strengths toward assisting areas of weakness, churches need to identify initiatives and then begin the work. Dr. Going asserts that congregations are just “putting on paper what we already know intrinsically.” As congregation members are given the chance to reflect together, there can now be openness and permission to dig in and make strategic changes.<sup>20</sup>

The top ten Faith Assets in *practice* at Longview Community Church are as follows:

Rank	ASSET	SPHERE	ACTUAL PRACTICE
1	Supports Youth Ministry	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7
2	Exercises Spiritual Influence	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7
3	Models Faith	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7
4	Establishes Effective Relationships	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7
5	Demonstrates Interpersonal Competence	Leadership (Pastor)	4.6
6	Provides Competent Leadership	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.6
7	Mentors Faith Life	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.6
8	Knows Youth	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.6
9	Is Well Organized and Planned	Youth Ministry	4.5
10	Supports Leaders	Leadership (Pastor)	4.5
15	Supports Youth Ministry	Congregational	4.3
18	Demonstrates Competent Adult Leadership	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.2
37	Reflects Family Harmony	Family	3.8

Figure 18 – Top Ten Faith Asset Practices at LVCC

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Nancy Going, phone interview with author, May 14, 2015.

In addition to the top ten, I have included the top asset in each of the four specific spheres – and remember that “Leadership” has three sub-categories: Pastor, Youth Pastor, Adult/Youth Leaders. Please note that these spheres are simply categories of assets. While the listing within each group is reflective of the highest scores in each category, the following diagram itself has no statistical significance. To illustrate these strengths using the four spheres, this illustration is helpful.

**STRONGEST Practices at Longview Community Church**

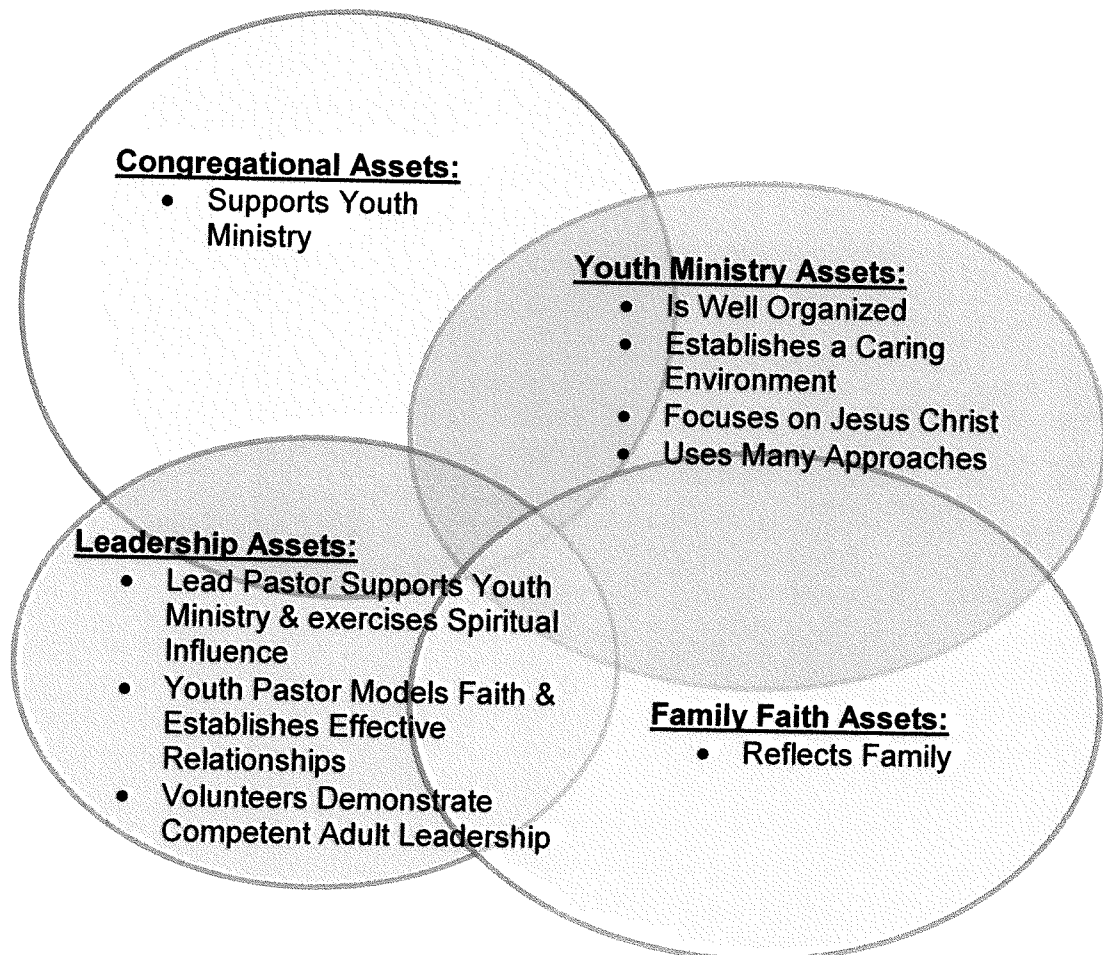


Figure 19- Strongest Practices at LVCC

It is important to highlight and publicly affirm the congregation for these important assets and even “catch them in the act” of living out these strengths in practical

ways. In my own setting, I have presented these findings to our church staff, our Board of Directors, Youth Committee, and Christian Education Committee. I have also shared these findings as part of a sermon highlighting support for youth ministry and written several articles in our congregational newsletter about these topics. It is vital to remember that it is from our strengths we can work on our areas of improvements.

#### Conclusions: “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey

After collecting the surveys and evaluating the responses, several findings emerge and give us a fuller picture of ministry health at Longview Community Church. It is now time to turn our attention to areas for improvement or “blind spots” within our congregation. Again, specific details will be offered as they relate to the different sections of this survey. But first, a few overarching reflections are appropriate here.

There seems to be a great deal of consensus that opportunities are needed for greater connections between the generations, especially in the support of Family Faith. Without a doubt, this necessitates a greater degree of collaboration between Children’s Ministry and Youth Ministry programs. Also, greater participation and involvement of youth in the life of the wider church appears to be an area requiring focus, especially encouraging families and students to participate (and even just attend!) more consistently on Sunday morning worship times. While every congregation could give attention to some of their lower scoring assets, for the purpose of this paper, we will not invest additional effort in this area beyond reporting to church leaders about the data.

Found within the written feedback of Section 1 of this survey, several areas for improvement were elevated and require attention. First, from a relational perspective within the youth ministry, there is still hope for greater connections among the youth



without cliques developing. This also means being more intentional about attracting new families and students, as well as working hard to help them get connected and feel welcomed. It is important to remember that a welcoming atmosphere was one of our reported strengths, so there is great potential for us to make progress in this area.

From a programmatic perspective within the youth ministry, there is concern about busyness and event overload. Within the wider context of this thesis, the themes of pressure and stress in the lives of our students and their families has been prominent. It is crucial that in our planning we take this dynamic into consideration and include both parents and students in our planning teams. Another area for improvement within the youth ministry program itself relates to the hope to improve our youth room (which we are presently in the middle of accomplishing).

From a congregational perspective, there is a desire for more intergenerational connections, especially to see more youth and families consistently participating in Sunday morning worship. While we need to keep encouraging adults in our church to take the initiative to show up in youth settings and not just expect teens to show up in adult settings, it is an important reminder of the ongoing challenge to raise the expectations for our families to nurture the faith of their children by a healthy habit of participation in congregational worship.

Last, there is an articulated hope for more collaboration, connection, and interaction between the Youth Ministry and Children's Ministry programs. This is an excellent strategic move because we not only have the same families involved in both programs, we also have the same goals of instilling faith in our growing young disciples, not to mention some of the practical elements of ministry (from safety training to

volunteer development to facility usage). Within each of these areas for improvement there are great advantages for greater coordination and investment as a congregation.

In evaluating areas of improvement from Section 2 of this survey, some of the same themes are reiterated. From a Faith Asset standpoint, vital conversations and focused effort is needed in response to low scores in the Family Faith sphere. It is also important to remember that a good number of those surveyed (about 40%) are youth ministry parents and so the scores that they have shared are (at least at some level) evaluating themselves as needing more equipping and support to make family faith a priority in their homes. Within the Youth Ministry sphere, there is a wish for greater participation and involvement of youth in the wider church. This would be a worthy arena in which to invest more time and energy. While some Congregational Assets could use attention (especially in places where there is a large “gap” between what is perceived as priority and what is experienced in practice), for the purpose of this thesis those endeavors will be reserved for others in church leadership.

The lowest ten Faith Assets in *practice* at Longview Community Church are as follows:

<b>Rank</b>	<b>ASSET</b>	<b>SPHERE</b>	<b>ACTUAL PRACTICE</b>
35	Makes Faith Central	Congregational	3.8
36	Fosters Ethical Responsibility	Congregational	3.8
37	Reflects Family Harmony	Family	3.8
38	Strives for Excellence	Congregational	3.7
39	Promotes Service	Congregational	3.7
40	Makes Mission Central	Congregational	3.7
41	Possesses Strong Parental Faith	Family	3.7
42	Promotes Family Faith Practices	Family	3.5
43	Equips Parents	Family	3.5
44	Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships	Family	3.4

Figure 20– Lowest Ten Faith Practices at LVCC

Again, it can be seen that all five Family Faith assets land in the bottom eight assets, so people recognize the great need in this area. It must be stated that the overall scores are not necessarily horrendous (3.4 out of a five-point scale); these just happen to be the assets that were ranked lowest in comparison to the others. The following diagram illustrates the lowest assets in each of the spheres.

LOWEST Practices at Longview Community Church

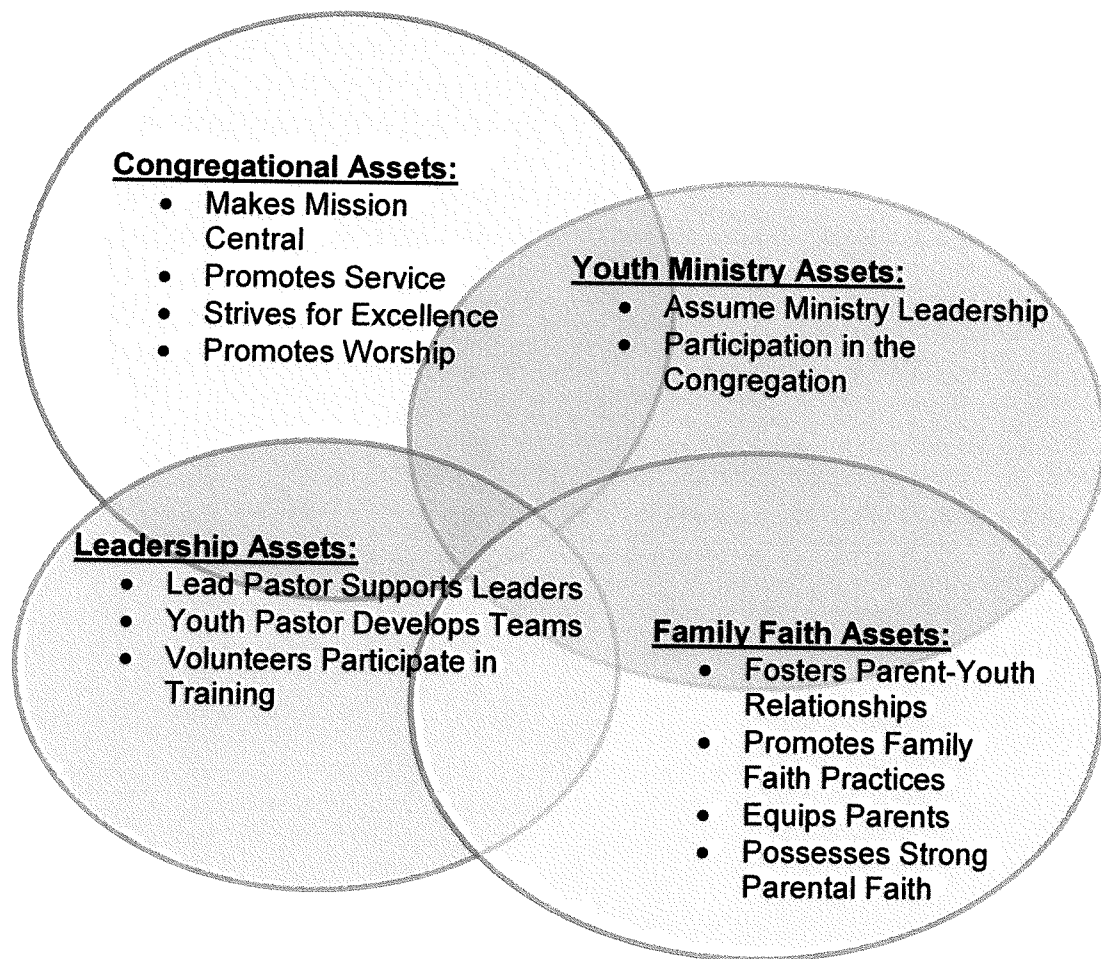


Figure 21 - Lowest Practices at LVCC

Even in the spheres where the overall scores are relatively strong, it is important to continually get feedback from our teams and ministry members to strengthen on ongoing ministry. I find it quite striking, for instance, that the two lowest assets in the Youth Ministry Sphere (Assume Ministry Leadership and Participation in the Congregation) are highlighted by other authors as essential objectives for inspiring faith durability for our students! Jim Burns asserts that ministry leadership and empowering students to carry out real responsibilities within the wider congregation is an essential competency to build up in our students.<sup>21</sup> For the authors of *Sticky Faith*, they conclude that “involvement in all-church worship during high school is more consistently linked with mature faith in both high school and college than any other form of church participation.”<sup>22</sup> These are no small coincidences! These factors will need to be included in further recommendations to be submitted later in this paper. For now, the great reminder remains – to truly connect the dots in community takes a congregational vision and commitment to invest in the big and little ways that are highlighted by these faith assets.

To bring a conclusion to this summary of findings, a brief analysis of the both the continuity and gaps will be conducted. For the most part, there is great continuity between the top ten assets found in both *priority* and *practice*. Nine out of the top ten priorities are also in the top ten for practices (with the remaining being #11). In the same vein, nine out of the lowest priorities are in the lowest ten for practices (with the remaining being #16 from bottom). This should be heartening for the congregation

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<sup>21</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 118-19.

<sup>22</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1068-70.

because it demonstrates that, for the most part, there is a great deal of consistency in the way in which ministry is communally and practically experienced.

Some pairings had significant gaps between perceived *priority* and actual *practice*. For the most part, these related to the Congregational Assets sphere. While it is interesting to see both the change in gap (again on a five-point scale), it is also telling to reflect on how far down the list certain assets fell in practice. For instance, “Creates Community” fell 13 places, “Experiences God’s living presence” 12 places, and “Emphasizes Scripture” 12 places. The following diagram and chart speak to this data. Hopefully, wider church leadership can help host good conversations to consider why these gaps are present.

#### Priority and Practice at Longview Community Church

##### Areas for Improvement

*Areas of Largest “Gaps” between Priority and Practice at Longview Community Church*

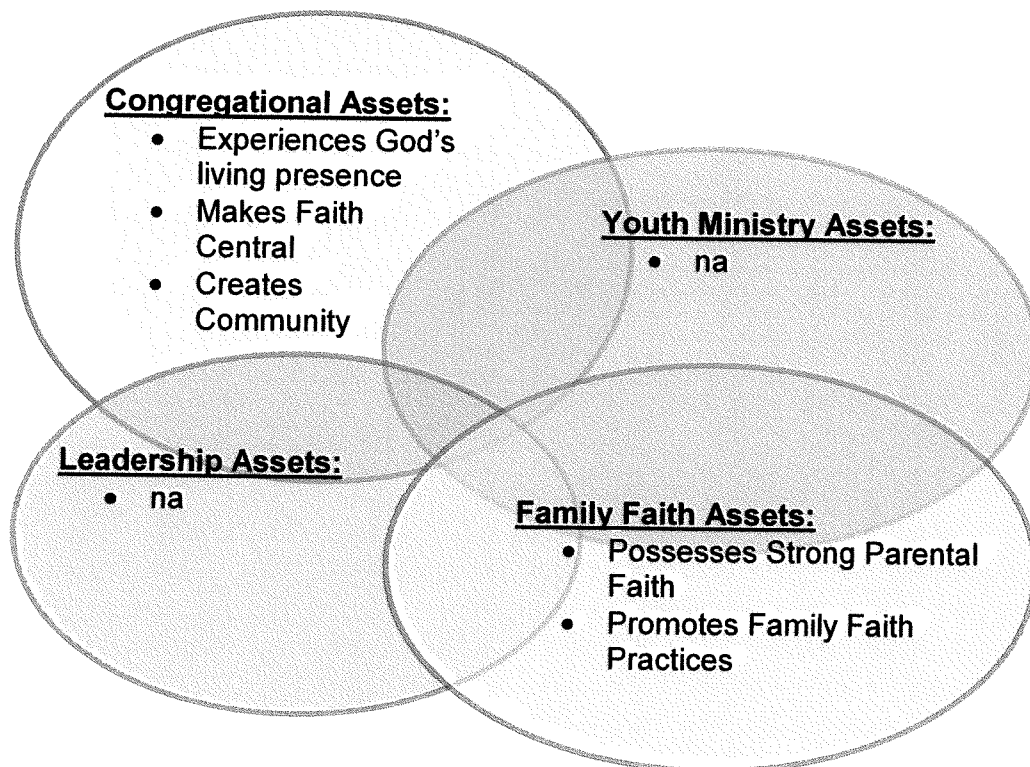


Figure 22 - Areas for Improvement

### Areas of Largest “Gaps”

ASSET	SPHERE	GAP	PRIORITY	PRACTICE	Difference
Experiences God’s living presence	Congregational	0.5	17th	29th	12
Makes Faith Central	Congregational	0.5	28th	35th	7
Creates Community	Congregational	0.5	20th	33rd	13
Makes Mission Central	Congregational	0.4	34th	40th	6
Emphasizes Scripture	Congregational	0.4	19th	31st	12
Focus on Discipleship	Congregational	0.4	18th	26th	8
Possesses Strong Parental Faith	Family	0.4	38th	40th	2
Promotes Family Faith Practices	Family	0.3	41st	41st	0

Figure 23 – Areas of Largest “Gaps”

This information might provide excellent fodder for church leadership conversations regarding matching our actions with our stated values. For the purposes of this project, inferential statistics were not applied to this data.

In synthesizing the bulk of this data and feedback, the final assessment of the “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey work is this: *Longview Community Church is in a very positive place of “Spirit and Culture” to nurture and encourage enduring faith for our youth. We have so much to be grateful for. However, focus is needed on family faith arena and evaluating the potential of ministry collaboration is critical.* Of course improvements have been highlighted and greater investment in these specific areas is needed, but our congregation should have great hope for the future of our ministry together – both to encourage enduring faith for our teens and healthy community for every generation.

### **Research Report: “Ready or Not” Survey**

#### Survey Description: “Ready or Not” Survey

After several years of experimenting with our Grad Prep Program, it was a perfect time to conduct a survey of our students and do some research on the effectiveness of the

program. The following is a synopsis of the research report and conclusions drawn from the research. This report will provide a narrative overview of the goal of the study, some general information about the study, overall summary of the findings of the study, and a final assessment. More details about the specifics of this study are available in the Appendix.

The goal of this “Ready or Not” survey was to measure the difference that a “college/grad prep” program makes for graduates. By comparing the two test groups (“prepped” students and “non-prepped” students), the conclusions of this study can be used to improve the grad prep process in our setting. The two primary targets of this study are summed up in the following questions:

- What difference does being part of a “college/grad prep” program make in helping students stay strong in their faith after graduation?
  - Trying to measure the “strength of faith” by using ten “faith concern” questions (which are quantitative scaling questions).
- What difference does being part of a “college/grad prep” program make in helping students know what to expect related to their faith after graduation?
  - Trying to measure the “level of expectation” by asking how their initial months after graduation compared to their expectations. There is only one quantitative scaling question in this section.
  - Also, one qualitative question (“fill-in-the-blank”) was used to receive general feedback about what one thing most prepared the faith of these grads.

Different types of questions were used to measure the two primary targets. First, ten different “faith concern” questions were asked on a four-point scale (from “Very Much Agree” to “Very Much Disagree.”) The intent was to get a sense of the perceived “strength of faith” in each area. For each question, there is a “weighted average” which gives the answer with the highest “strength of faith” a score of “four,” with the lowest “strength of faith a score of “one.” The highest “strength of faith” score is *not* always the

“strongly agree” answer. Within the chart below, the highest “strength of faith” score is marked. The following chart illustrates how the average scores for each question would be characterized.

- Scores between 3.25 and 4 (on a four point scale) = Encouraging
- Scores between 3 and 3.25 (on a four point scale) = Positive
- Scores between 2.5 and 3 (on a four point scale) = Fair
- Scores below 2.5 (on a four point scale) = Needs Focus

Another key element of this study was to *compare the “gap”* between the two test groups (“prepped” and “non-prepped” students) to determine the impact of the program on their faith.

The second type of question asked of the survey participants related to how being part of some sort of prep program assisted them in knowing what to expect with faith related challenges after graduation. Again, bringing a comparison between the two test groups regarding their expectations was to provide some insight on the effectiveness of such prep programs.

#### Participants: “Ready or Not” Survey

This survey was taken by graduates of Class of 2014 who were active in youth ministry as high school seniors, both in our congregation and other area churches. The survey was taken 6 months after graduation (Dec. 2014) and about three months after the majority of the students began their college careers. Of this group of 45 participants, about two-thirds of them (69%) participated in some sort of grad/college “prep” program, either in our church or another congregation in the area. At Longview Community Church, we had about twenty semi-active seniors involved in our youth ministry, so I knew that I would need additional seniors from other area youth groups and was blessed to have their participation.



Did you participate in a “college prep/grad prep” program with your youth group before graduating from high school?	Responses: 41 answers
Yes	69% 25
No	31% 16

Figure 24– Participation in a "Prep" Program

#### Procedure: “Ready or Not” Survey

In an effort to recruit participants, I publicized the survey at our Grad Prep Program and sent out a website link to our grads using both email and Facebook messaging. This link was also sent via Facebook to several area youth pastors who passed it on to their seniors. This survey utilized Survey Monkey to receive the responses and the responses were anonymous. There was a short summary at the beginning of the survey that explained the nature of this doctoral research and the goal of the survey work. It also included an informed consent statement.

#### Results: “Ready or Not” Survey

After collecting the surveys, several initial observations emerge from the research. Below are listed overall reflections, with specific responses shared in charts. As an overall statement of affirmation, it would appear that there are relatively higher responses of strong faith than I would have imagined prior to seeing the results. Interestingly enough, these high marks show up in both the “prepped” and “non-prepped” categories. It is also very intriguing that there is literally no consistency between one group demonstrating higher responses for “strength of faith” than the other! Regarding their level of experience lining up with what they expected, there is certainly a discrepancy that will need to be further evaluated.

In the charts that follow, response scores for the ten “faith concern” questions are listed in three different ways. First, the overall score of the entire group is shown in the rows marked “ALL.” Next, the answers of students who identified being part of a college/grad preparation are shown in the rows marked “Prepped.” Last, the answers of students who had not been part of some sort of college/grad preparation are shown in the rows marked “Non-Prep.” The group with the strongest score is noted. With each question, four responses were possible (from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.”) As a reminder, each question alternates the “strength of faith” weighted average. For example, question #1 “My faith in Jesus Christ gives me a GREAT SENSE of purpose and meaning in life” has the “strongest” answer as “Strongly Agree,” receiving a “4” in the overall average, while the “Strongly Disagree” answer receives a “1.” In the next question, the weighted average is reversed. With each question, the chart shows which group scored highest, as well as the “rank of score” related to the other 9 questions.

<b>Ready or Not.... Is your faith ready for life after youth group?</b>						
<b>#1 - My faith in Jesus Christ gives me a GREAT SENSE of purpose and meaning in life.</b>						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	1	0	16	24	3.54	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	0	0	13	12	3.48	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	1	0	3	12	3.62	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Agree HIGH
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Non-Prep"	-0.14	#1 out of 10
<b>#2 - I make most of my moral decisions WITHOUT really relying on my faith.</b>						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	8	27	4	1	3.05	40
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	5	18	2	0	3.12	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	3	9	2	1	2.93	15
					Highest Score	Strongly Disagree
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Prepped"	0.19	#5 out of 10
<b>#3 - I OFTEN turn to God to deal with the natural loneliness that comes during this season of life.</b>						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	1	8	18	13	3.08	40
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	0	6	11	8	3.08	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	1	2	7	5	3.07	15
					Highest Score	Strongly Agree HIGH
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Prepped"	0.01	#4 out of 10

Figure 25- "Ready or Not" Survey Results

#4 - It is RARE for my conversations with others to have anything to do with God.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	2	27	11	1	2.73	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	2	17	6	0	2.84	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	0	10	5	1	2.56	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Disagree
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Prepped"	0.28	#8 out of 10
#5 - My decisions about my future career are VERY MUCH influenced as a calling from God.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	1	7	20	13	3.10	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	0	6	13	6	3.00	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	1	1	7	7	3.25	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Agree HIGH
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Non-Prep"	-0.25	#3 out of 10
#6 - My commitment to prayer and reading of scripture is a greater STRUGGLE in this season of life than it was in high school.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	9	10	15	7	2.51	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	5	9	8	3	2.64	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	4	1	7	4	2.31	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Disagree
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Prepped"	0.33	#9 out of 10

Figure 25 – "Ready or Not" Survey Results

#7 - Consistent participation in a church or campus ministry is a VITAL part of my life.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	3	12	13	13	2.88	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	1	9	7	8	2.88	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	2	3	6	5	2.88	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Agree HIGH
Difference		Stronger	Score	TIE	0.00	#6 out of 10
#8 - The speed and stress of life makes it incredibly DIFFICULT to trust God in real-life ways.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	12	11	17	1	2.83	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	8	8	8	1	2.92	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	4	3	9	0	2.69	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Disagree
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Prepped"	0.23	#7 out of 10
#9 - I am vulnerable with and sharpened by a Christian accountability partner(s) that I meet with REGULARLY.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	7	13	15	6	2.49	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	5	8	8	4	2.44	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	2	5	7	2	2.56	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Agree
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Non-Prep"	-0.12	#10 out of 10

Figure 25 – "Ready or Not" Survey Results

#10 - Intellectual attacks on my faith in academic situations (or just attitudes about Christianity in ordinary conversations) NEGATIVELY affect my confidence in God.						
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
ALL	21	19	1	0	3.49	41
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Prepped"	12	13	0	0	3.48	25
Answer Options	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Rating Average	Responses
"Non-Prep"	9	6	1	0	3.50	16
					Highest Score	Strongly Disagree
Difference		Stronger	Score	"Non-Prep"	-0.02	#2 out of 10

Figure 25 – "Ready or Not" Survey Results

In reflecting on the question regarding how their experience matched up to their expectations, there does seem to be a significant variance between the "prepped" and "non-prepped" groups. This is interesting to consider in contrast to the earlier sections of questions in which there appears very little difference between the two groups. (I've included both a table and pie chart to communicate the contrast.)

Think about what you expected a YEAR AGO in regards to these faith challenges. Which statement best represents your experience?	"Prepped" Students 25 answered	"Non-Prep" Students 16 answered
My experiences are very much what I expected	48% 12	19% 3
My experiences are a little bit of what I expected	28% 7	31% 5
My experiences are different from what I expected	12% 3	19% 3
My experiences are very much different from what I expected	12% 3	31% 5

Figure 26– "Ready or Not" Expectations Results

### GRAD PREP STUDENTS SURVEYED

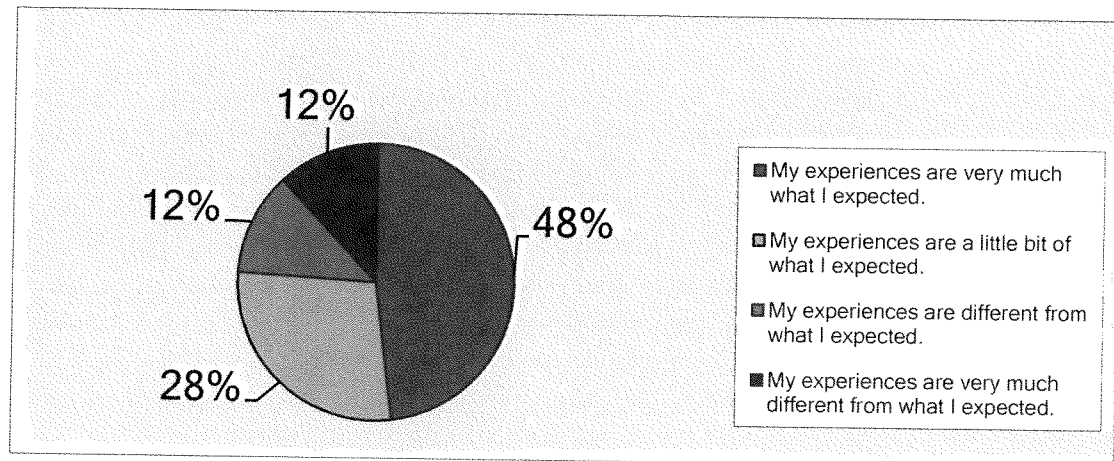


Figure 27– Grad Prep Students Surveyed

### NON-GRAD PREP STUDENTS SURVEYED

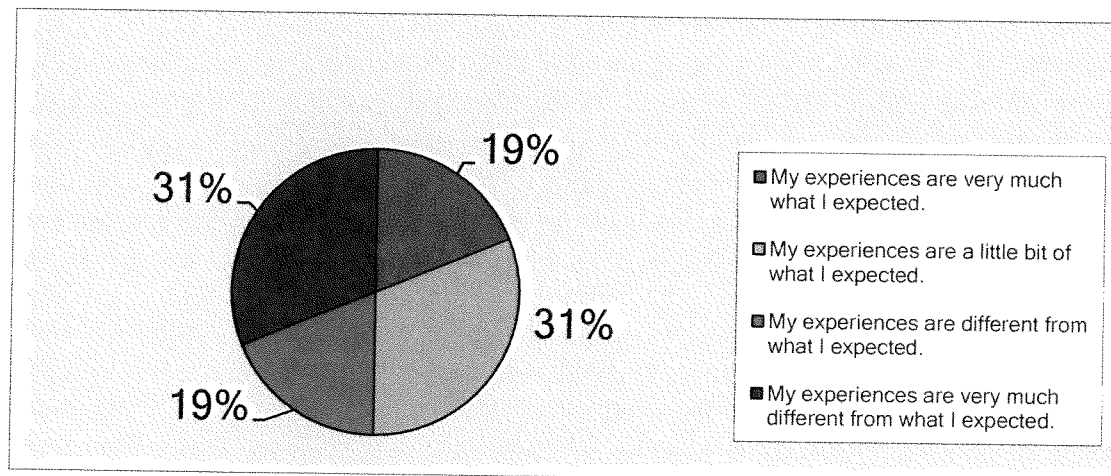


Figure 28– Non-Grad Prep Students Surveyed

The graduates also provided written feedback in response to the question, “If there were ONE thing that most prepared your faith for life after graduation, what would it be?” The following specific answers were given (and I’ve included them under thematic headings that I have created).

- Habits of personal faith and devotion:
  - “deep knowledge of the Word”
  - “trust in God”
  - “That Jesus would walk with me even through my hardest times.”



- Peer relationships of accountability and fellowship:
  - “Knowing that I have a whole community of God-fearing people who support me and are willing to help and take care of me whenever necessary as well as challenging me to grow.”
  - “My friends/mentors that stuck with me and really committed to knowing and loving me as a person.”
  - “My accountability partner and the relationships I built through youth group.”
  - “Conversing with others about what it would be like.”
  - “Knowing people will always be there.”
- Youth Group/Ministry Experience during High School (and goals to stay involved in church/ministry):
  - “The ability during middle/high school to get many basic theological questions (is there a God, who is said God, why is the Bible true, etc.) for myself so that my faith had a personal foundation before I was out on my own.”
  - “Receiving the gospel in a correct and true way. Many of my friends are struggling because they are having to re-learn their faith.”
- College/Grad Prep Classes:
  - “Learning the things to do right when I got to college (finding a campus ministry that I liked best and staying with it) and how to stick with my faith throughout college has helped me more than I ever thought. I also typed down key points to remember in my phone so that when I got to college, I had a guideline right there with me to help me grow in my faith. Having the different ministries and churches email was wonderful as well. With that I knew where to go and didn't have to search for churches when I got here. It was a stress reliever.”
  - “The college prep group that was held. We acquired accountability partners that help talk about what is going on in our lives and hold us accountable for growing in our faith during college.”
- Family Faith:
  - “My family and my Father especially. Thus, my faith is a rock on solid ground.”
  - “My grandpa's advice”
  - “Encouragement from family and friends”

#### Conclusions: “Ready or Not” Survey

In evaluating the responses from these grad surveys, three primary findings emerged from the research.



First, it would appear that there was very positive and encouraging news about the majority of the grads surveyed. Strong faith was exhibited in many of the answers for both the “prepped” and “non-prepped” students. If scoring greater than a three (on a four point scale) is considered positive, then over half of the ten faith concern questions scored positive. Actually, the overall score of the grads on all ten questions was about a three! Six of the forty-five students scored a 3.5 or greater on all ten questions. Overall, it would appear that their active involvement in their churches and youth groups as seniors (even if they were not involved in a specific grad prep plan) is a very good thing! Some of the questions that had the strongest responses were:

- My faith in Jesus Christ gives me a great sense of purpose and meaning in life.
- I often turn to God to deal with the natural loneliness that comes during this season of life.
- My decisions about my future career are very much influenced as a calling from God.

It was delightful to see that issues of purpose and vocation and hope in the midst of the loneliness of this season were being linked to a faith response by these students. It was also very interesting to see that in half of the questions there was only one specific student (out of 45) who gave the lowest answer to these five questions. This is a cause for prayer for that struggling student – as well as gratitude for many of the other students who were doing fairly well.

One additional facet of this part of the research led me to deem two of the faith concern questions as faulty. Really, these questions were seeking honesty about faith struggles after graduation and not truly suited to measure the strength of the student’s faith. Just because a student admits that finding time for prayer and scripture reading is harder after high school doesn’t mean that they aren’t striving to do so. Ultimately, these

questions will be removed from future evaluations and serve as an important reminder that *how* a question is asked is just as important as *what* the question itself asks.

A second finding of the research was initially surprising (and discouraging) to me. From the scores of faith concern questions, it would appear that there is very little difference seen in answers between “prepped” and “non-prepped” students as they consider aspects of the strength of their faith. The widest gap between the scores of the two groups was only .33 (on a four-point scale) and the two test groups literally split the scores of the ten questions. Comparing the scores was like watching a teeter totter – “prepped” students would score higher with one question and then the very next question “non-prepped” students would score higher. Some of the questions that had the lowest overall response scores were:

- It is rare for my conversations with others to have anything to do with God
- I am vulnerable with and sharpened by a Christian accountability partner(s) that I meet with regularly
- Consistent participation in a church or campus ministry is a vital part of my life

While these topics are a vital part of the curriculum of the Grad Prep Program, it is obvious that we cannot talk too much about these challenges or stop short of giving the best tools for students to become better equipped in dealing with these challenges.

After the initial shock of interpreting these scores, I was reminded that the overall scores of the entire group were more encouraging than I expected. As I pondered what was behind the “prepped” students not scoring higher in their strengths of faith, it was helpful to stay aware of all the dynamics at play during this season of transition are very complex and cannot be “fixed” by a program. Simplistic thinking and a desire for a “silver bullet” had seduced me, even after I have spent countless hours researching the thorny problem of lost faith during late adolescence facing the church – even after I have

spent countless pages writing about the need for a holistic and integrated response! Other factors obviously play a role in these responses (family faith, present involvement in a faith community at college, relationships of accountability), so measuring the strength of their faith cannot be boiled down to one program. Thankfully, I was very encouraged by the next key finding of the research.

The third finding of the research shows that there is a major difference between these two test groups seen in how much college experiences are “like what they expected.” From the survey, it gives the impression that the greatest impact of a Grad Prep Program is to help students in adjusting their expectations for faith challenges after high school. Survey participants were given the question: “Think about what you expected a YEAR AGO in regards to these (faith) challenges. Which statement best represents your experience?” Speaking generally, nearly half (48%) of “prepped” students stated that their experiences were “very much” what they expected (compared to 19% of “non-prepped” students). Also, only 12% of “prepped” students said that their experiences were “very much different” from what they expected (compared to 31% of “non-prepped” students.) The previous charts helps to illustrate that at the *extremes* of expectations, “prepped” students responded positively at a level nearly *three times higher* than their “non-prepped” peers!

This is a very encouraging result of the survey and provides more than enough fuel for me to personally continue in the work of finessing and improving our Grad Prep Program. Considering one of the vital accounts of the “Sticky Faith” research that shows “only one of every seven graduates leaves youth group feeling ‘very prepared’ for what college brings their way,” this aspect of the “Ready or Not” survey results gives hope for

the hard work of equipping our students to transition well.<sup>23</sup> And as the *Sticky Faith* authors reinforce, “Our research shows that feeling prepared really matters. The more prepared students feel—whether that be to make friends or to handle new lifestyle choices—the more likely their faith is to grow.”<sup>24</sup>

In reflecting on the charts above, any congregation that is doing the work of intentionally preparing their graduates should be bolstered by the fact that it is making a difference. It is worth the investment.

Really, that is the thrust of the final assessment of the “Ready or Not” Survey work – that Grad Prep Programs are worth the investment, effort, and intentionality. Simply put: *Grad Prep programs do make a difference in helping students know what to expect related to their faith after graduation.* Certainly there can be improvement in seeing more of an impact on some of the specific faith issues discussed in the curriculum (and this will appear in the ministry recommendations later in this paper), but in light of so many challenging aspects of students ditching their faith after high school, signs of hope should definitely be highlighted and amplified!

One way in which such highlights can come is through the words of the graduates themselves (seen quoted above). In their written feedback about the things that “most prepared their faith for life after graduation,” the themes that emerged show great aspirations of continuing to grow in their faith. These themes were:

- Habits of personal faith and devotion
- Peer relationships of accountability and fellowship
- Youth Group/Ministry Experience during High School (goals to stay involved)
- College/Grad Prep Classes
- Family Faith

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<sup>23</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 2572.

<sup>24</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2574-75.

And I believe that it is no coincidence that several key motifs from this thesis appear in the narratives of these students. They express a personal faith ownership anchored in Christian fellowship (among their nuclear family, church family, and peers.) They recognize the intentionality of amazing investment in their congregations to prepare them and launch them as strong believers into their next season of life through focused youth ministry. For some, specific grad and college preparation programming has augmented their experience of faith and simply illustrates a wider congregational commitment to invest in a durable faith for their youth. And while there is always room for improvement, looking at the “Ready or Not” survey results leads me to believe that when we are intentional about preparing our students, they will most certainly be *more ready than not!*

Now that the research results of both surveys have been adequately covered, specific recommendations will be proposed for a more focused youth ministry and more intentional congregational vision to work in unison to inspire lasting faith in our students. While each one of these proposals could appear overwhelming and unattainable by itself, the overall intention of these next steps is to force essential conversations among ministry leaders and staff to address the results of these surveys, as well as cultural dynamics that have been covered in this project. Ultimately, the next steps that are offered are prayerfully extended, with input and feedback from several leadership teams at LVCC. As these plans are deliberated, we’d be wise to remember the words of King Solomon (in this order of priority!) “Many are the plans in a person’s heart, but it is the Lord’s purpose that prevails.” (Proverbs 19:21, NIV) “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” (Proverbs 15:22, NIV)

## **PART II: Next Steps to Invest**

“It’s also like a man going off on an extended trip. He called his servants together and delegated responsibilities. To one he gave five thousand dollars, to another two thousand, to a third one thousand, depending on their abilities. Then he left. Right off, the first servant went to work and doubled his master’s investment. The second did the same. But the man with the single thousand dug a hole and carefully buried his master’s money.

“After a long absence, the master of those three servants came back and settled up with them. The one given five thousand dollars showed him how he had doubled his investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’ The servant with the two thousand showed how he also had doubled his master’s investment. His master commended him: ‘Good work! You did your job well. From now on be my partner.’

“The servant given one thousand said, ‘Master, I know you have high standards and hate careless ways, that you demand the best and make no allowances for error. I was afraid I might disappoint you, so I found a good hiding place and secured your money. Here it is, safe and sound down to the last cent.’

“The master was furious. ‘That’s a terrible way to live! It’s criminal to live cautiously like that! If you knew I was after the best, why did you do less than the least? The least you could have done would have been to invest the sum with the bankers, where at least I would have gotten a little interest. Take the thousand and give it to the one who risked the most. And get rid of this ‘play-it-safe’ who won’t go out on a limb. Throw him out into utter darkness.” (Jesus in Matthew 25:14-20, *The Message*)

Though youth ministry may be highly valued by most churches and though it has had little across-the-board success, churches often fail to see the need to invest appropriately in youth ministry. It’s time to acknowledge that our culture has dramatically underinvested in the creation of nurturing structures for its young and that churches have been among the slowest to invest...the difference between an effective and an ineffective youth ministry is often directly tied to the level of investment a church makes.<sup>25</sup>

– Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*

If Mark DeVries is right, churches who want to make a difference with faithful ministry that sticks for the long haul must know the difference that wise investment makes. Too often our congregations resemble the servant who was a “play-it-safe”

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<sup>25</sup> Mark DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 31.

servant in this parable of Jesus; too driven by fear and faithlessness to risk putting his resources to work. Ultimately, many of these churches are literally missing out on partnership with Jesus in raising up faithful young disciples who are ready to be launched into life after high school. Lack of faithful investment is “criminal” in the eyes of Jesus; partnership in faithful ministry is willing to risk to invest in the best!

After analyzing the previous research that relates to my own personal ministry context, several next steps to invest are being offered to seize new opportunities in our midst to better help students connect the dots in community. These concrete efforts propose specific ministry recommendations for church leadership to consider and implement. Four next steps to invest come as recommendations in two primary categories. One relates to an overall congregational initiative, while the second is more of a programmatic task dealing with the Grad Prep Program itself. Specifically, here are the recommendations organized in the two distinct ministry arenas:

- *Commit to a New Congregational Agenda*
  - *to create an new kind of culture of partnership between church and family*
  - *to form a new “Family Ministry Exploration Team” and experiment together*
  - *to shape a new default of key leaders always asking key questions*
- *Strengthen the Grad Prep Program in the context of the wider youth ministry program to support our students as they gain vital competencies for the journey.*

While there are myriad possibilities to be fleshed out in each of these areas, the task of this paper will only advise some potential efforts in each of these four next steps and really challenge congregational leaders toward implementation so that they themselves have a sense of ownership in the particulars of efforts in these areas. Details will first be suggested for the congregational agenda (with three elements for reflection), to be

followed with particulars relating to the next step of strengthening the existing Grad Prep Program.

In processing the first recommendation, it should be reiterated that when it comes to setting the stage for durable faith for our students, environment is everything. Mark DeVries drives home the point by declaring, as ministry leaders, we are called to be “environmental architects.” He expands:

I like to call it environmental architecture (a term borrowed from Erwin McManus). An environmental architect begins with the confession that we have no power to make young people grow. We cannot make our churches or youth ministries or senior pastors into what we want them to be. We cannot make parents, volunteers and students do what we want them to do. What we can do is create an environment in which this kind of growth and change is not only possible, but probable.<sup>26</sup>

Growth and change are the targets we are shooting for! And like the EYM perspective, other researchers have seen a specific correlation between students with long-lasting faith and the environment of the home congregation as a place that prepared them to launch faithfully. Related to environment, Kenda Creasy Dean affirms two critical resources to graduate students with “consequential faith: (1) highly devoted teenagers themselves, and (2) highly devoted congregations, in which youth and adults alike teach, tell, and take part in the Christian God-story to cultivate missional imaginations for the church and for the world.”<sup>27</sup> Dean further stresses that “religious formation is not an accident. Teenagers reporting high degrees of religious devotion did not get that way on their own; their faith is the legacy of communities that have invested time, energy, and love in them, and

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<sup>26</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle locations 3347-48.



where the religious faith of adults (especially parents) inspires the faith of their children.”<sup>28</sup>

With this in mind, we’ll now consider some of the specifics behind committing to a new congregational agenda by creating a culture of partnership, forming a specific “Family Ministry Team,” and shaping a new default for our leaders at Longview Community Church. Each of these individual elements have the sense of being “new” because they must be built on the conviction that the “same old, same old” will continue to produce the same old results!<sup>29</sup> The problem of lost faith in the emerging generation deserves our best efforts and an openness to something new.

#### **NEXT STEP #1: Create a New Kind of Culture of Partnership**

Throughout this project, we’ve seen time and time again that the culture of an individual congregation determines the health and vitality of its ministry. For this reason, any church agenda that is committed to something better for our students must be deliberate in dealing with the culture of that specific congregation. This is the first recommendation of this thesis: That Longview Community Church strive to create a new kind of culture, one of partnership across the generational span. Since culture is created corporately, the making of a new kind of culture of partnership will need a broad-based level of involvement and investment. And responding to the overall research that challenges the wider church to shift to meet the challenges we are speaking of, we are wise to remember the words of Andy Crouch regarding these shiftings of church culture: “Creativity is the only source of change.”<sup>30</sup> If we refuse to deal creatively with these

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<sup>28</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle locations 3353-59.

<sup>29</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 123.

<sup>30</sup> Andy Crouch, *Culture Making* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), Kindle location 804.

struggles, we will remain in the same ministry ruts. Obviously, we must bring this word of challenge with gentleness and respect for the many people who invest deeply in our present ministry. Yet, we must not be afraid to call for the necessary changes we believe God is calling our congregations.

Chap Clark and Kara Powell write that there are ministry ditches that affect dynamics in every church, often forcing extreme responses of students declaring “my family is my church” or “my family doesn’t matter” when it comes to my faith.<sup>31</sup> But a creative balance is needed in the conversation, Clark and Powell continue “When a philosophy of raising children (and adolescents) ignores the need for a greater community beyond the nuclear family during the discipling process, youth lose out on God’s plan for their development. This ditch hurts kids because God never intended any of us to go it alone in raising our children.”<sup>32</sup> Again the theme of the wider church community is raised here and a commitment to this kind of new partnership is needed.

With a strong congregational agenda to create a culture that intentionally blends the generations, there is much hope in my particular home church because our surveys point to a great desire to do just that. Leadership and intention are the things that need to take this stated wish and make it a tangible reality with practical outcomes. If we fail to do so, we will not only get more of the same (many students graduating from their faith). We have to take the time to evaluate our practices and recognize that there are times we are hurting ourselves. Walt Mueller writes, “We must stop our destructive practice of separating the body of Christ along generational lines. For example, we must ask

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<sup>31</sup> Chap Clark and Kara Powell, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), Kindle locations 1974-81.

<sup>32</sup> Clark and Powell, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World*, Kindle locations 2027-29.

ourselves why we are so quick to remove teenagers from the opportunity to worship with the older, wiser and spiritually gifted members of our congregation by starting a separate culturally relevant ‘youth worship.’ Doing so robs the body of Christ of its ability to function properly.”<sup>33</sup> This is not just about our young people missing out; it’s about all of us missing out!

To avoid this kind of discouragement, the place to begin is evaluation. Key ministry leaders and staff should evaluate the wider church’s commitment to focus on family faith and intergenerational connections, consider the further recommendations of this paper, and furthermore generate their own plans for improving the passing on of faith to our youth. If you are like me and you are tired of so much investment in the lives of our high school students not paying off the kinds of dividends we expected, then let’s do something different. If we are honest about the “humbling parade of youth ministry shame, (where) we keep watching kids walk out the back door of the church and away from their faith.” we need to connect to the wider church and utilize all the assets available to us to maximize our impact on our youth.<sup>34</sup>

By highlighting existing programs that support family faith and amplify opportunities for greater connections, the specific assessments from the “Plugged In” Youth Ministry survey can serve as a starting place for discussing opportunities for improvement. Some of the existing programs that deserve special attention and augmentation are resources for parents, programs that connect the generations,

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<sup>33</sup> Walt Mueller, *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2006), 193.

<sup>34</sup> Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), Kindle locations 232-36.

intergenerational ministry teams, and the expectations revolving around families consistently worshipping together.

In assessing some of the present resources that Longview Community Church makes available for our parents, there are some excellent seeds being planted. Our Children's Ministry puts out a monthly newsletter with articles and encouraging devotional thoughts, in addition to weekly "take home sheets" from the Sunday School classes. Within our youth ministry, we send out a weekly informational email to all parents and students that normally includes a link to family faith resources (from groups like Homeward, Sticky Faith, or CPYU). I've also been facilitating a monthly "family faith conversation" as an adult Sunday School option that has been a parent book club format. However, while these resources do exist, they seem to lack on overall structure or plan to make the biggest bang. Reggie Joiner reminds us that:

Without an integrated strategy, parents struggle over how to partner with the church, programming tends to be isolated in impact, there is no consistent forum to evaluate and improve what you are doing, volunteers become disillusioned with the lack of direction, leaders and staff drift toward silo thinking, overprogramming and competing systems dilute your influence.<sup>35</sup>

It is clear that integration and intention is needed, so this goal should be at the forefront of the evaluation process.

In addition to looking at resources offered, an appraisal of the programs and teams that are seeking to connect the generations should be evaluated. One such attempt in our home church includes a prayer partner program that links all of our active middle and high school students with an adult support person. In addition to the adult receiving a picture of the student and contact information, we have quarterly open house fellowship

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<sup>35</sup> Reggie Joiner, *Think Orange* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2009), Kindle locations 1609-12.

times for the students and adults to connect and seek to make the relationship mutually encouraging. From a safety standpoint, we insist that all prayer partners pass a criminal background check and have begun initiating more specific training to help the adults set realistic expectations of this kind of supportive relationship. While their commitment is only for one school year, many partners recommit to pray for their student for additional years. As mentioned earlier in this paper, we have also proactively pursued these prayer partners to continue to support their student for the year after graduation and have had almost 100% participation in this way.

Another programmatic element that has been effective in encouraging our grads has been the seasonal care packages that we have prepared for our former students (as mentioned earlier). Individualized notes (from younger students and adults in the church), devotional books, candy and homemade goodies – all of these have been received with great gratitude. It has been very special to see pictures posted on Facebook of dorm rooms decorated with these notes. It is amazing how great an impact is made by such small efforts. It reinforces the need our grads feel to not be forgotten.

Presently within our church life, there are several ministry teams that are intergenerational. Several church-wide mission teams over the past few years have made it a goal to include all ages, even seeking chances for entire families to serve together side by side. Our contemporary service song team has high school students involved in their ministry as full-fledged vocalists or players. Even the hand bell choir has become nearly half and half in their ratio of adults and students, ranging in age from 11 to 80! The irony of this reality is this: Even the director of the hand bell choir admits that this really happened almost by accident – and definitely by necessity. But in retrospect,

everyone realizes that similar creations of blended ministry teams can happen with much more deliberate planning – and a blessing to all!

While there are really no church committees striving for having members of all generations beyond the Youth Committee and some of the planning teams in youth ministry, this has been raised as a worthy objective for the future to further affirm the importance of our students practicing their faith and being fully enfranchised members of our church communities.<sup>36</sup> It is also interesting to note that right now there is no clear track for teenagers for membership and even voting privileges within our church's political structure, so there is also an opportunity here to see students more fully embraced in our intentional aims to disciple them. This must even include greater family participation in teaching younger children about church sacraments and other significant traditions in such a way that it sets a pattern (even a scope and sequence) of curriculum from birth through graduation.

One final area for greater focus to support family faith and intensify intergenerational opportunities relates to our approach to setting expectations and hopes for our children and their families consistently participating in worship together. It would appear that culturally the importance of consistent worship attendance as a family is moving toward extinction, replaced by sports tournaments and other extracurricular activities. Perhaps the saddest aspect of this loss of sacred times and spaces in our life routine is that it seems to be happening without many parents even aware of the potential consequences of lost connection and lost faith. The authors of Passing on the Faith develop a strong argument for events like corporate worship by citing, "Through

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<sup>36</sup> John Roberto, Wesley Black, and Roland Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry* (St. Paul, MN: EYM Publishing, 2010), Kindle locations 233-46.

intergenerational activities a congregation can create opportunities for members to become surrogate parents, uncles, aunts, brothers, or sisters to one another. A congregation is the only institution in a community that is open to all ages and is equipped in its program and message to provide a family experience.”<sup>37</sup> But if this family experience doesn’t become a priority in the wider culture of the congregation – with a clear articulation of the benefits of such a commitment – it seems clear that this swing toward inconsistent presence at church will continue for our families. Where and when intergenerational connection are deliberately embraced, however, two significant experiences occur for our youngest disciples. They form “trustworthy and transformational” relationships with “threshold people” and encounter “hospital spaces” to be challenges to grow in faith.<sup>38</sup> This is reminiscent of Nouwen’s desire for all of us to be blessed by people and places where our belovedness is constantly affirmed and celebrated.<sup>39</sup> Such threshold people are simply family relationships at their best anchored in Christian fellowship, where nurture and challenge and unconditional support are the norm.

Finally, for key ministry leaders and staff to truly do an effective job of evaluation, some level of accountability is required. I would suggest that the Board of Directors request of the entire church a commitment to a “season of support” (of at least a year) for greater intergenerational awareness, investment, and equipping to help inspire an intentional family faith mindset. This might include monthly meeting of program staff and other key leaders for focus on family faith and intergenerational issues, as well as the

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<sup>37</sup> Merton P. Strommen and Richard A. Hardel, *Passing on the Faith* (Saint Mary’s Press, 2000), 157.

<sup>38</sup> Strommen and Hardel, *Passing on the Faith*, 281-82.

<sup>39</sup> Nouwen, *Life of the Beloved* 50

encouragement of at least quarterly conversations among standing church committees to discuss the same kinds of ministry opportunities. A greater sense of congregational responsibility would definitely be encouraged were a monthly report of progress in this area be part of the Board of Directors meeting as well. Overall, the creation of a new kind of church culture of partnership will not happen on accident. It takes intention and attention, but is most definitely worth it!

### **NEXT STEP #2: Create a New Team and Experiment**

Within the context of culture, we've also been reminded of the power and potential of intergenerational relational ministry in multiple ways throughout this project, from a family faith perspective as much as from the wider church family fellowship. But a vital challenge remains: How will coordination and collaboration happen in a congregation to maximize the impact of these relationships? In response to this question, the next recommendation stresses the creation of a "Family Faith Exploration Team" as a one year experiment. This next step should seek involvement across the board in its formation and several tangible endeavors are suggested below.

First, in forming the team, members from Church Staff, Christian Education, Youth Committee, SAM Team (Senior Adult Ministry), as well as parents and students in the congregation should be invited to serve on the team. This team should be resourced with key articles, books, and documents to provide an overview of different perspectives on family faith, as well as core segments of this thesis.

From the outset, this team should host an initial retreat for team building, goal and expectation setting, and some ideas to begin accomplishing the primary task of creating church-wide initiatives to respond to the core concerns related to family/intergenerational faith. Some of the starting inquiries are as follows:



- Where can we as a wider church invest and focus differently to create a new mindset that inspires family faith and intergenerational connections?
- How can we consider ways to strategically challenge families in their vital role in the faith development of their children?
- Why is consistent attendance and participation in Sunday morning worship services a high bar challenge that we should aspire to as a church?

These (and many other questions) should be developed in advance of this retreat – and participants in this team should come into the retreat having read some key documents and resources so that there is a common understanding of the larger goal of this team.

Some additional proposals should be included in the mission of this team. One significant investment for the congregation would be for the team to research and suggest a training event or conference with key ministry leaders and staff to grow in their understanding of family faith resources, bring back these resources to the Family Faith Exploration Team, and then communicate to the wider church. These are the types of tools that will help bring the team together, create a common language to speak about these intergenerational issues, and inspire a synergy to encourage the wider church.

One of the specific outcomes of this team's work should be pointed directives to help create a new climate of collaboration and partnership between Children's Ministry and Youth Ministry. Again it should be stressed that this does not mean just the addition of more events and programs, but rather a coordination of efforts within the church body. Reggie Joiner emphasizes working with an "integrated" team model as essential to any church's strategy to move a congregation to a greater awareness of family faith labors.<sup>40</sup> Other authors (such as Mark DeVries and Jim Burns) would most likely identify this

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<sup>40</sup> Joiner, *Think Orange*, Kindle locations 1782-85.

overarching emphasis of a “family-based” model of youth ministry, with a great awareness that such an approach is not a program, but rather a mindset.<sup>41</sup> We can no longer just do “business as usual” if we want to see such collaboration and intentionality happen within our churches. We have to change our perspective to better equip parents and verse the entire congregation in the process of assimilating our youth into the wider church body and truly passing on a faith that lasts.<sup>42</sup>

To take the model of individual faith constellations to the highest degree, an entire congregation needs to understand and embrace its calling to be true fellowship to each other – and especially to the emerging generation – and then really becomes a spiritual safety net for all involved! Jim Burns poignantly writes that any such wider church focus essential must target connections with their immediate families. Burns asserts that if we as churches want to see faith have a “lasting influence in the lives of our students, we must involve and connect with their parents. This is the difference between throwing students a rope and building a net!”<sup>43</sup> He continues this illustration by asserting:

Many students today are on a spiritual high wire. More often than not the Church has attempted to reach out to students by throwing them a rope and hoping they would grab hold. For many of us in youth ministry, the scenario is more like trying to throw a rope to five falling kids at once! Family-based youth ministry takes a different approach: investing in the construction of a safety net to place underneath students—one that will both reach out to and support them. An important element of the net is parents, but it may also include volunteers, small-group leaders or even elderly men and women in the church who will pray daily for a handful of students.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Jim Burns and Mike DeVries, *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry* (Ventura, CA: Gospel Light, 2003), Kindle locations 216-20.

<sup>42</sup> Burns and DeVries, *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 237-43.

<sup>43</sup> Burns and DeVries, *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry*., Kindle locations 272-74.

<sup>44</sup> Burns and DeVries, *Partnering with Parents in Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 286-91.

The Family Faith Exploration Team would have as its primary function the magnification of a sky full of constellations! Empowered by the right kind of research and finding the right kinds of ways to share this family faith perspective with the wider church will set up a framework for this relational web of spiritual support. Such an “intersection and partnership of parents...and adults representing the church and committed to their spiritual and life development” is the wider goal of connecting the dots in community for all generations!<sup>45</sup>

Practically speaking, this team should meet once a month, with the long-term goal of bringing specific recommendations to the Board of Directors at the end of their one year commitment about how they sense God is calling Longview Community Church to best pursue an extended family-based ministry emphasis to our congregation. This team should include the tasks of assessing present church curriculum for youth, children, and families, avenues of communication with our families, faith milestones that are presently part of the rhythm of congregation life at LVCC, and reflecting discoveries for encouraging family faith in the midst of the wider church body. The best case scenario would have this team giving a monthly update to the Board of Directors about their progress and key findings, as well as salient conversations that are happening in the wider church regarding family faith.

The efforts of this team can be significant for many reasons. One of the most ironic dynamics of a church that sees itself as having a strong youth ministry is the issue raised by Ben Patterson:

It is a sad fact of life that often the stronger the youth program in the church and the more deeply the young people of the church identify with it, the weaker the chances are that those same young people will remain in the church when they

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<sup>45</sup> Clark and Powell, *Deep Ministry in a Shallow World*, Kindle locations 1966-70.

grow too old for the young program. Why? Because the youth program has become a substitute for participation in the church, just as the youth worker has been a substitute parent. When the kids outgrow the youth program, they also outgrow what they have come to know of the church.<sup>46</sup>

Being a “substitute” is a weak alternative to the real thing, true community and the true impact of family faith. The implications of the wholesale division of the generations within our churches is a faulty model of ministry. Jonathan McKee provides this challenge:

Follow this logic. We separate youth culture and adult culture for 22 years. Then upon graduation from college, students are expected to immediately blend with the adults they’ve been separated from for 22 years. No wonder these young generations feel the need to start churches of their own. They’ve never been taught how to have relationships with anyone more than three years older than themselves. Perhaps we should consider keeping the family together more often in our ministries. Maybe we should extend our outreach events to entire families?<sup>47</sup>

No wonder it is often so difficult during the college years for young adults to feel like they can belong to a new church. If this team takes its work seriously, we can extend the invitation to all of our ministries to incorporate families – and connect the dots in community with the wider church family as well. A Family Faith Exploration Team could raise a beautiful vision of connection and make a ripple effect across generations. This would do much more than just support the faith of our teens, it would bless people of all ages.

I remember a conversation I was having over a luncheon with parents within my youth ministry program and we were processing some of the theories behind the *Sticky Faith* research. I recall one of the parents pausing and commenting with quite a bit of fire: “I am feeling manipulated.” The conversation just stopped and I asked my friend

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<sup>46</sup> Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again*, Kindle locations 1004-13.

<sup>47</sup> Jonathan McKee, *Connect: Real Relationships in a World of Isolation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), Kindle locations 2622-28.

Dave to tell us more about what he was thinking. He simply said, “I thought we were here to talk about the faith of my kids and how I can help them improve their own walks with the Lord. But here we are talking all about our own personal faith journeys and the reality that my faith has a direct impact on the faith of my children!” I just smiled and said, “Well, if you want to call that manipulation, I’m ok with that!”

Our parents need a team like that Family Faith Exploration Team to support a church-wide dialogue about how each of us can have our own “ah-ha” kinds of moments. When we discover that we are all modeling life and faith to our own families – and to the younger generation in our church family, there is a sense of weight with such a responsibility. At the same time, we intuitively know this is true. Our modeling matters! As Mark Holman declares, “The question is not are we passing things on to our children, but what are we passing on to our children.”<sup>48</sup> With the work in response to this recommendation, greater attention can be given to what we are passing on to our children and then new patterns of consistently asking the right questions can emerge for our congregation.

### **NEXT STEP #3: Form a New Default: Key Leaders Always Asking Key Questions**

As church climate is shifted with a greater commitment for intergenerational connections and a core of congregational members outline a team-based process of discovery and exploration, the stage is ready to set a new default within Longview Community Church. To truly be about becoming a faithful ministry sending out faithful young disciples, this new default must force our key ministry leaders to always be asking key questions as it relates to family faith. Most churches get into the stuck ruts of

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<sup>48</sup> Mark Holman, *Faith Begins at Home* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005), 41.

unhelpful habits and routines by their default directed by tradition or conflict avoidance or ministry nearsightedness. The same can be said of us as well. But a new default is possible as culture and climate are addressed. And this new “normal” can slow us down enough to consider key ministry questions. These key questions can relate to the simple tweaks of existing ministry (*“How can we adjust this event to make it more intergenerational?”* or *“How can we better include parents in this program and equip them to be activated in faith conversations with their kids?”*) Or these key questions can speak to the deeper foundational mission of intergenerational ministry (*“How can I help others see opportunities to make deeper connections with people of different ages in this setting? For me... or for another?”* or *“Is there a mentoring role I can play in this scenario with this younger believer?”*) Possibly more important still, these key questions might inquire about the deep spiritual aches with our students and their families (*“With all our busyness and stress within the church, are we really helping – or hurting – our families?”*)

One of the central tasks of the Family Faith Exploration Team should be to capture and clearly articulate these kinds of key questions that become part and parcel of the new habits that we want to form as a congregation. For the purpose of this next step, we will briefly survey potential aspects of a default that looks to slightly adjust existing ministry; while a more thorough challenge of modeling a default of mentoring will be investigated.

If your church is like Longview Community Church, the schedule crunch and activity level of programs can be simply overwhelming. We’d be wise to pay attention to

the counsel of Doug Fields who warns that there is a scary “price to pay” when our busyness leads to:

- Constant clutter
- An addiction to speed
- Extreme multitasking
- Superficiality
- Relationship fatigue
- Apathy
- And spiritual emptiness<sup>49</sup>

That’s why our action must be led by a sense of God’s clear calling as a church, otherwise all of our frenetic energy can sometimes cause more damage than good. Fields points out the high cost of unfocused busyness: “Busyness is often the primary factor in a ministry life that crashes and burns. When you’re moving too fast, it’s difficult to reflect on the past, evaluate your current condition, or focus on the future.”<sup>50</sup> As our congregation shifts to a new default of looking for opportunities to become more intergenerational in our programs, it’s a tremendous invitation to seek greater health for all of our ministry teams. Knowing *why* we do *what* we do the *way* we do it is an essential leadership skill that must continually be sharpened. Busyness for the sake of busyness alone is a marker of our society that is not always led by faithfulness to Jesus. And Jesus himself is quick to remind his dear friend Martha about the importance of choosing the “better way” of Mary and slowing down. (Luke 10:38-42)

However, when we evaluate existing programs and ask good questions about how they might be more inclusive of family interaction or intergenerational connections, this new kind of reflex can put the activity in the right context – that of serving the larger

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<sup>49</sup> Doug Fields, *What Matters Most when NO is Better than Yes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), Kindle locations 303-76.

<sup>50</sup> Fields, *What Matters Most when NO is Better than Yes*, Kindle locations 246-47.

purpose of being the body of Christ and not just “doing stuff.” With the help of the Family Faith Exploration Team, such reflexes can inspire new discourse about ministry opportunities, and perhaps breathe new life into programs and events that have started to wane in energy. The authors of *Consuming Youth* illustrate this reflex by proclaiming:

The challenge lies not in reinventing an old youth ministry model or even creating a new one but in simply rethinking, reimagining, and paying attention to what we’re already doing. In the end it’s about living with and walking alongside youth, making them an integral part of the community, not segregated from it. It’s about being the deep and rich and whole community Jesus has called us to be. And that is well within reach.<sup>51</sup>

We can bring much hope by pointing to this reality “within reach” – and to let our people know that we are not talking about doing *more* ministry events, but simply shifting *how* we do them.

Another aspect of setting a new default relates to our key leaders inspiring all members of our congregation to ask themselves how they can have eyes to see chances to connect with members of the emerging generation in their midst. To sum it up in a word, our congregation could take seriously the call to be mentors to one another, relationally investing in all kinds of different ways. While the entire topic of mentoring is much too large to cover extensively at this point in the project, some encouraging voices must be listened to – because if our default is open to these kinds of connections, there is no limit to the kind of impact that could happen. In order to give a concise sketch of this impact, it all goes back to some of the core needs found among adolescents today; their need for listening ears, encouraging words, and just the gift of time and attention.

We can inspire our congregation to have the default to be listening ears to the young disciples in their church family. We can train our adults to be excellent question

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<sup>51</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2497-2508.



askers – and engaged and active in their listening skills. Tim Clydesdale firmly declares the following about the most surprising thing that he learned from researching students’ transition from high school:

I would say it was how open teens were to talking to a sympathetic adult listener. It was as if they yearned for a sounding board—a listening and engaged ear—and once they found it in the interview room, they poured out their hearts. Neither their parents nor their peers provided an unfettered place in which the teens could talk; it seems that the adults in teens’ lives were more interested in telling them something than they were in listening to them, and that friends were likewise so caught up in their own concerns they didn’t listen very much either. This reveals something about American culture—that we nurture individuals so consumed with themselves that we as a culture are losing our desire if not our ability to listen. Even well-meaning folks like teachers, parents, and youth pastors get so caught up in conveying a set of ideas that they rarely let up on the barrage of information. Teens are drowning in competing claims for allegiance, and no one, it seems, is providing the time and space to sort through all of this.<sup>52</sup>

Amazing! Our default as adults seeking to connect must be about listening and not telling – and if we are honest, this will be a challenging shift to make.

But it is a shift that must be made. The authors of *Slow Fade* make the call appropriately personal: “If every adult got passionate about investing in one person, the world would be changed. Literally. That’s not wishful thinking; it’s reality.”<sup>53</sup> As we all think back on our own lives, we can reflect on the key people who listen to us, encouraged us, and gave us their time and focus. You don’t have to look far in the research to see how such relational impressions can change everything for a struggling young person. As Jim Burns asserts, “Most often, the difference between kids who make it and kids who don’t is one caring adult”<sup>54</sup> Burns has a prominent plaque in his office to

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<sup>52</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 2317-26.

<sup>53</sup> Reggie Joiner, Chuck Bomar, and Abbie Smith, *The Slow Fade* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Pub., 2010), Kindle locations 486-90.

<sup>54</sup> Jim Burns, *10 Building Blocks for a Solid Family* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2010), Kindle location 244.

always remind him of this fact and it reads, “Every child needs someone who is irrationally positive about them.”<sup>55</sup> Our new default as a church must send the same kind of message time and time again.

As I listen to the stories of young adults who have grown up in my youth groups, I recognize that they embody the research results in one primary regard: Every single one of them would say that the thing that made their time in our youth ministry most special were the many adults in their lives. God used these mentoring relationships to make a positive impact, to cheer them on. And while I have only recently started using the vernacular of constellation, the healthiest ministry that I have participated in has always been structured in a way that surrounds students with caring adults who are there to help make the difference for them.

One of the most transformational stories of the power of mentoring comes from Donald Miller. Miller – made most famous as the author of *Blue Like Jazz* – has become a champion of mentoring relationships because of his own story. Miller inspirationally writes about his own youth pastor, David:

I only tell you this to say David Gentiles, who could have done just about anything else with his time, decided to spend time with me and give me a shot at writing. He was somebody who stepped into my life and helped me believe I was here on purpose and for a purpose. I don’t think there are very many things more important than this when we are kids. The truth I’ve learned about life is you can’t do it on your own. People don’t do well independently.

One generation passes wisdom to the next, wisdom about girls and faith and punctuation. And you won’t be as good a person if you don’t receive it. And in life, I figure, you are going to pretty much do the things that make you feel good about yourself, make you feel important and on purpose, and walk away from the things that make you feel like a loser.

I distinctly remember this phase in my life, this time when I started writing, as a kind of fork in the road. On one hand, a good friend and I had just discovered a

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<sup>55</sup> Burns, *10 Building Blocks for a Solid Family*, Kindle locations 462-467.

quick and easy way to break into houses, stealing loose change from jars on people's dressers. And then there was this writing thing going on, and it wasn't like I was deciding which person I was going to become; it's more like I was swimming in a river and there were two equal currents. I could have very easily ended up in prison— first breaking into houses, then falling in with the wrong crowd, then drugs, and so on and so on. A statistic.

David Gentiles was the person who threw out a rope. He was a father figure. People assume when you're swimming in a river you are supposed to know which way you are going, and I guess some of the time that is true, but there are certain currents that are very strong, and it's when we are in those currents we need somebody to come along, pull us out, and guide us in a safer direction.<sup>56</sup>

People who can “throw a rope.” In a community, these combined ropes make a safety net.

Certainly we've seen that there are cultural influence that are sweeping this generation

like treacherous rapids, and I believe that God is calling our congregations to new

defaults of thinking and acting that remind us to take the initiative to reach out to

struggling (i.e.; all) adolescents in our midst. Miller himself admits that – at the time – he

wasn't even fully conscious of his gaping ache for a father-like mentor. Miller continues,

“I was a split person: Half of me wanted to be mentored through life— the side, I

suppose, that wanted a father— and the other half would rather not answer to anybody.”<sup>57</sup>

This is the dilemma of adolescence; stuck between being a child and an adult, and often without much hope of someone being there for you. For a church to take seriously the calling to connect the dots in community, new defaults about healthier patterns of ministry and devoted commitment to initiating connections with our youth can produce many life-changing benefits. Not only will faith be anchored in Christian fellowship, but the very environment of spiritual nurture that leads to a truly owned faith will also help

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<sup>56</sup> Donald Miller, *Father Fiction* (New York: Howard Books, 2010), 17-18.

<sup>57</sup> Miller, *Father Fiction*, 25-26.

young people navigate issues of morality, relationships, and even vocation. Walt Mueller presents this challenge:

God's design is to use families and the larger body of Christ to point young people to their divine purpose. But teenage life in today's culture leaves us wondering if we've heeded God's command. Families, even those in the church, are falling apart and malfunctioning. While many in the church have not intentionally turned their backs on the young, they are only "beating the air" and as a result, our youth are leaving the church in droves.<sup>58</sup>

But at Longview Community Church, we want something so much better and richer for our next generation! I do believe that God's design calls the entire body of Christ and by giving intention to resetting some of our standard operating procedures in our own congregation, we can develop new defaults that ask the right questions about helping our families and making greater connections.

#### **NEXT STEP #4: Strengthening the Grad Prep Program**

With a solid foundation of a healthy church environment, a focused team process to explore wider family faith, and a dedication to keep asking the right questions, the last recommendation advocates specific efforts to strengthen the Grad Prep Program at Longview Community Church. Although it is just one aspect of a focused youth ministry, a strong Grad Prep Program will be complemented by attention given to several crucial areas within the entire program to students. Two strategic proposals are offered in this regard. First, one very practical action that needs to be taken is the building up of a Grad Prep Team to provide better support of the students throughout this two year process. We must remember that every healthy ministry effort is best when we utilize a team! Second, the best adjustments to supplement the Grad Prep program would be accomplished by concentrating on the building up of core competencies in the lives of our upper classmen

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<sup>58</sup> Mueller *Engaging the Soul of Youth Culture*, 24.

throughout our youth ministry in more deliberate ways. Both of these proposals will now be explored.

### Building Up a Stronger Team for Grad Prep

While I would say we've had some encouraging success with our years of experimenting with preparation ministry for our graduates, I am convicted that the impact of this program would be much greater if we dedicated time and energy to build a full team to undergird our efforts. If we want to communicate about the high priority of this aspect of our ministry, then it deserves our best intention, and widespread support from a team is the best way to safeguard ongoing support. Burnout of one or two volunteers (or myself) as staff for the Grad Prep Program doesn't serve the students – or the ministry – in the long-haul, so we need to practice what we preach about connecting the dots in community to build a strong team. Many ministry leaders reinforce that vitality in any ministry must be team-based. It is an essential that must not be ignored.<sup>59</sup> Doug Fields drives home this point by writing:

I don't fully understand my retirement fund or how it works, but I understand the simple principle invest today or I'll be hurting in the future. You don't need to know everything about volunteers during your first two years, but you can understand one simple principle: invest in your leaders today and they'll pay kingdom dividends in the future. Invest in your leaders.<sup>60</sup>

Team ministry will help widespread involvement happen in a way that can lead to widespread ownership.

As care is given to various dynamics of the Grad Prep Program and primary responsibility is shared with others, this a beautiful picture of faithful ministry! Some of

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<sup>59</sup> Doug Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), Kindle locations 3505-06.

<sup>60</sup> Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 3663-66.

the particular ways that a wider team could bring this kind of support include curriculum development, parent resources, food and hospitality tasks, and accountability follow-up. Another area which can easily be neglected is enhanced synchronization with other adult ministry leaders in our youth program. Our small group leaders and church prayer partners should be fully informed and included as the Grad Prep Program progresses.

One unique tool that could really benefit from wider adult participation is called “College Church Connection.” Programmatically, with a stronger team in place we could better engage students with the reports from this ministry in several ways. Here’s a brief summary of this unique system as they seek to assist students for owning their faith after graduation (from material from College Church Connection):

College Church Connection provides customized reports on college-town churches and campus ministries for leaders at Protestant and Catholic churches and Young Life clubs. Here's how it works: Youth leaders encourage their high school seniors to fill out an online church preferences survey, and then leaders receive a report for each student. The reports recommend specific churches and ministries that match what the student wants with what is available at that specific college. These reports contain contact information for college ministry leaders and college-town church pastors so new students can make connections even before they arrive on campus. These customized reports are especially helpful for students heading to big state universities where there may be dozens of Christian ministries on campus. Instead of trying to navigate 40 ministries, a student can try out the four that are recommended by College Church Connection.<sup>61</sup>

After two years of having this service available to my students, I recognize that a much better effort to encourage their faith ownership of their commitment to Christian community needs to happen. To better utilize this tool, several steps are needed. First, better communication as we unveil this tool in the months prior to receiving the report could address several different audiences from whom we could then illicit help. Parents and key mentors found in the students’ constellation could become aware of the specific

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<sup>61</sup> Pamphlet from “College Church Connection.”

timeline and plan around processing the potential ministries that the student could visit and engage as they land on campus.

I believe that we will experiment with a College Church Connection night during the fall for the seniors to take the initiative to invite their mentors (and I'll invite their parents) and we'll discuss the timetable of this survey and report, as well as the overwhelming amount of research that speaks to the importance of the first few weeks at college related to faith ownership. A commitment from all parties will be solicited, so that the parents and mentors can stay prayerfully engaged and set dates for those future conversations that can lead a graduate to say, "I want to visit these two ministries on campus when I land." The mentor especially (but also the parent) could then be very engaged during the first couple of weeks of school to ask the right kinds of follow-up questions. These are just some of the ways in which a greater team-based approach could encourage a greater impact of the overall Grad Prep Program.

#### Building Up Core Competencies for our Upperclassmen

Perhaps the most effective adjustments to the Grad Prep Plan relates to building up core competencies for our upperclassmen throughout all of our youth ministry endeavors to better equip them for life after high school. These chances to hone specific skills time and time again in a variety of settings should be an articulated goal of the Grad Prep Program, even though it will programmatically most often happen in non-grad prep settings. But it is within the Grad Prep Program setting that we can purposefully see how all of these different competencies can complement and encourage each other. Developing maturing disciples and putting real faith into practice relates to such core

competencies and is really a helpful tactic to inspire sticky faith.<sup>62</sup> There is an important caveat to be considered, however. Care must be given as we seek to empower our students in both their “competencies and confidence” because our end goal is to seek them mature, not just be used up or burned out in one more setting that wants them to perform and succeed.<sup>63</sup>

Real maturity then, is about being successfully launched as faithful believers into the world. Several times throughout the research and reading conducted for this project, the image of spiritual journey during this season of young adulthood has been best described as a ship setting sail from port, heading into uncertain waters. As I was thinking about this metaphor, I was reminded of the fabulous quote: “The safest place for ships is in the harbor, but that’s not why ships were built.”<sup>64</sup> Ultimately, all of us are built to sail, to be on our journey with our Lord, moving toward greater maturity. Surely we are all drawn to the safety of the shore, but as we trust God and set sail – hopefully convoying with others sailing as well – we are growing up in our relationship with Christ. This is the kind of strength of faith that the Apostle Paul writes about:

So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of people in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11-16, NIV)

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<sup>62</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 2437.

<sup>63</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 2450-54.

<sup>64</sup> Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2007), Kindle Locations 633-635.



With these images of sailing and maturity in mind, we will now explore four different kinds of “ships” as core competencies that should be readied for the journey to become equipped in the body of Christ: relationship, discipleship, leadership, and ownership.

### The Core Competency of Relationship

Obviously much of this thesis is grounded upon the conviction that *everything* is relationship when it comes to properly understanding our Christian journey. In evaluating the overall scheme of the Grad Prep Program to keep relational ministry at the forefront, then, requires creating more avenues for follow-up and accountability support throughout. From the outset, we cannot simply talk to our upperclassmen about the crafting of their personal constellation. We need to improve upon inviting those people who students highlight as stars in their constellation to be intimately involved in conversations of accountability throughout the program. These supportive adults should be trained with resources so that they too are confident in their skill to encourage students. Simply put, Grad Prep cannot happen in a vacuum in the corner of the youth program. It must intentionally be interwoven into a student’s connection to the youth ministry and wider church as well. Relationships cannot be left to chance, so here are some assessments of how building the competency of developing relationships can be expanded in our ministry.

First, we should take every opportunity to remind students to become the initiators of key relationships in their own life. The authors of Consuming Youth describe this enrichment for our students in this way:

When essential “connectedness” happens, teenagers find others who will support them. They’ll find “mentorship and support,” ....there will be “a readiness and willingness to serve each other. They will find adults who include youth in the

“adult world,” helping them actually become a real part of it. They will find adults and a wider community that demonstrates an adult resilience—with adults coming back again and again in their efforts to connect with teens—in spite of teenagers’ apparent disinterest. But in order for any of this to happen, youth must actually engage with adults—a community of adults, in fact.<sup>65</sup>

Competency and confidence in engaging adults will be vital for our students as they launch into their next season of life – so our program should give multiple opportunities to refine this skill. And we must not forget that theme of relationships takes intentionality. Kenda Dean reminds us of the point of it all as she writes, “Sociologists consider a young person’s sense of belonging in a religious community to be a more accurate predictor of his or her adult religious involvement than regular church attendance. Caring congregations help teenagers develop what social scientists call ‘connectedness’”<sup>66</sup>

And often our students grasp these realities more than we do as adults! They know that their relationships matter and are shaping them into the people that they will become. They just need the assistance of more experienced adults (perhaps “wisdom”) to give the guidance that helps them recognize the influence of these kinds of connections in their lives and take responsibility for seeking out the healthiest friendships possible. Author Derek Melleby highlights this fact with a powerful reflection on the power of Christian community – and truly all of our formative friendships. As referenced earlier, Melleby quotes actor Will Smith’s amazing perspective here: “The best thing that anybody ever said to me is that you’re only as good as the people you associate with. Look at the five friends that you spend the most time with—that’s who you are.”<sup>67</sup> As

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<sup>65</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 987-93.

<sup>66</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle Locations 1278-81.

<sup>67</sup> Derek Melleby, *Make College Count* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), Kindle locations 747-55.

I've shared this quotation with students, they intuitively know it to be true...and they also shudder to consider how little attention they have given to this fact!

A second aspect helping students improve on their relational savvy relates to frequent reminders about the responsibility of actually having and sharpening a relationship with an accountability partner. We need to establish coaching and monthly follow-up with students to make sure that this level of commitment to each other isn't just spoken, but it is acted upon. Larry Crabb reminds us that "spiritual togetherness, what I call connecting, creates movement: Togetherness in Christ encourages movement toward Christ."<sup>68</sup> We grow best in our relationship with Jesus Christ as we are doing so with others in close fellowship, as we've seen many times. We know that when we throw around words like accountability and transparency, we are truly setting the relational bar very high – higher than most seasoned adults who have been Christians their whole lives are willing to go! At the same time, we adults often wish someone would have come alongside us when we were younger and warn us about the fruitlessness of doing our Christian journey on our own. To do so is exhausting. Dallas Willard speaks the truth when he invites us to something deeper when consider the following – and we would be building a core competency to do the same for our students:

Thus we let some friends in Christ know who we really are, not holding back anything important, but, ideally, allowing complete transparency. We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, which normally takes up such a dreadful amount of human energy. We engage and are engaged by others in the most profound depths of the soul.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Larry Crabb, *Becoming a True Spiritual Community* (Nashville, TN: Word Publishing Group, 1999), Kindle locations 542-45.

<sup>69</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1988), 187-88.

Our Grad Prep Program needs a repeated mantra of “engage deeply with others in connectedness...and that is on you; it is your responsibility!” But we cannot just say this mantra; it must be part of our training. Students need our support to be equipped in such a way. Tough love and boldness to challenge each other should become a theme that is amplified through stories of real-life accountability lived out.

One of my favorite songs by folk artist, Brooks Williams, illustrates this commitment to relationship perfectly.

But if I can't trust you, who can I trust  
You're the one who knows me even better than myself.  
You can love me tender, can you love me tough?

Hard love, need your hard love.  
Tell me if you think I'm doing wrong  
And if I'm sinking down, give me a strong arm.  
Hard love, need your hard love,  
I can count on you to hold me tight,  
Can I count on you to steer me right?<sup>70</sup>

We need each other to be both loved tender and tough, held tight and steered right. But this does not happen on accident. Jerry Bridges challenges, “It is likely that most Christians neither appreciate the importance of spiritual fellowship nor know how to go about it. They need both instruction and encouragement in the true biblical practice of *koinonia*.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, instruction and encouragement must continue to be refined in our Grad Prep Program to make this core competency a reality, a habit that helps them sustain strong faith for the next season of life.

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<sup>70</sup> Brooks Williams. “*Hard Love*.” *How the Nighttime Sings*, Red Guitar Blue Music, CD, 1991.

<sup>71</sup> Jerry Bridges, *True Community: The Biblical Practice of Koinonia* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2012), Kindle Locations 945-47.

### The Core Competency of Discipleship

A second core competency that should be given greater emphasis with the existing Grad Prep Program deals directly with discipleship. Words like discipleship and fellowship are deemed so “churchy” and archaic that they often have little impact on young believers today. This is unfortunate because being made a disciple is at the core of the Great Commission of Jesus (Matthew 28:16-20) and the inability of our young people to articulate a clear understanding of what it means to be a maturing disciple should concern us as church leaders.<sup>72</sup> Within the Grad Prep Program is an excellent setting for our students to polish their own perspective on their spiritual journey in and through dialogue with other students, as well as adult mentors.

In reflecting on the “Ready or Not” survey answers of faith concerns, I noted some encouraging markers that our students were seeking to be faithful in this next season of life with a deep level of faith. At the same time, our present approach with the Grad Prep Program seems to lack the transformational conversations that could and should be had around the topic of discipleship, since there really is no discrepancy in the faith issues seen between the prepped and non-prepped students. In light of this, several tasks should be considered to further sharpen this aspect of the Grad Prep Program. A more targeted approach to curriculum and conversations around these faith concerns should help our students grow in their ability to articulate what it means to follow Jesus Christ as a disciple.

Even as it comes to ways that our students need to be prepared for some of the intellectual arguments against Christianity that they may encounter during their college

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<sup>72</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 134.

years, we have the privilege of assisting them to shape their critical thinking skills. Derek Melleby asserts, “Students who enter their college years knowing the right questions are far more prepared for college than those who think they have all the answers.”<sup>73</sup> We must take care, then, to insure that we are incubating lively challenges to their faith while they are in our midst and help them feel like they are wrestling in an affirming and safe atmosphere with some of the most fundamental questions of life. From his research with former church-ed young people, David Kinnaman calls “unexpressed doubt” a “destroyer of faith.”<sup>74</sup> And so the way to actually use those *very same doubts* to strengthen faith instead of destroy it is found in the way we create the web of safe relationships and conversations that the Grad Prep Program (and other intergenerational connections) are meant to inspire. Kinnaman calls out the church in its task to “help this generation face their doubts squarely and integrate their questions into a robust life of faith” as a primary task of our time.<sup>75</sup>

In the NSYR survey that Dean and Christian Smith cite, often our parents are less concerned about their children’s depth of faith transformation that happens in our churches and more concerned with a “church-is-good-because-it-will-help-keep-my-kid-off-drugs-and-increase-their-seatbelt-use mentality.”<sup>76</sup> Smith clearly asserts that from a sociological standpoint, faith maturity and discipleship are reflected in students with increased congregational attendance, but there is also a great danger if such faith and

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<sup>73</sup> Melleby, *Make College Count*, Kindle locations 86-87.

<sup>74</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle location 3552.

<sup>75</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 1457-71.

<sup>76</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle locations 5906-10.

practice are deemed lesser goals by parents than helping adolescents become “healthy and good citizens.”<sup>77</sup> Such pragmatism is a shallow view of discipleship.

But a biblical model of discipleship as a growing competency is that of a mature faith bearing fruit.<sup>78</sup> Kenda Dean does an excellent job of examining the biblical link between such faithful production and a relationship with Jesus as she brings us back to the words of Jesus found in John 15:7,8: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”<sup>79</sup> As we reiterate this dynamic for our students, we then have an excellent context to talk with them about the specific faith concerns that will challenge them in this next season. *Will their faith in Jesus Christ give them a great sense of purpose in life, even a sense of calling? Will their faith affect their moral decisions and be part of their everyday conversations with others? Will they turn to God to deal with the natural loneliness they experience? Will spiritual disciplines (same root word as “disciple”) lead them to sustain a commitment to prayer, scripture reading, and regular participation in a church body?* All of these concerns relate to their ability to be launched as faithful disciples. But they first need to practice these skills in our midst, during the season prior to their launch.

Dean offers confident hope that when a church takes seriously the use of “tools for cultivating consequential faith – even if they are rusty from disuse... (this church becomes one that) sends young people out rather than ropes young people in.”<sup>80</sup> But Dean goes on to say that there are true obstacles for a congregation (and its youth

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<sup>77</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle location 5912.

<sup>78</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 81.

<sup>79</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 81.

<sup>80</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 106.

programs) to be effective in equipping its young disciples. “If adults cannot speak Christian any better than young people can, spiritual apprenticeship fails,” Dean critiques.<sup>81</sup> Returning to a congregation-wide focus, she concludes:

The solution is not to abandon apprenticeships but to engage the pilgrim principle: look for places where adults can move beyond their comfort zones and talk about their faith in teenagers’ presence. Adults commonly long for the quality of ministry churches offer young people, and there is no reason that the informal practices of formation that we have come to expect in youth ministry should not characterize all ministry. Adults need spiritual apprenticeships as much as their children do—and adults need them first.<sup>82</sup>

If our churches are honest, the competency of discipleship is as much of a challenge for all of our adults as it is for our children! Dallas Willard puts it like this: “Nondiscipleship is the elephant in the church.”<sup>83</sup> But Willard gives a pattern for us to pass on to the young adults in our Grad Prep Program (remember earlier when I called it an “upperclass discipleship track?”). We get to nudge them to decide to be a disciple and grow into all that this means. Willard writes, “Now Decide... We become a life student of Jesus by deciding... It will not just happen. We do not drift into discipleship.”<sup>84</sup> Like a ship being christened and launched into life, a course must be set toward ongoing growth in their relationship with Jesus.

The call to discipleship is quite literally a “come to Jesus” moment! But we should not be apprehensive of leaning on our students who have stepped into a deeper track of spiritual growth or have self-defined themselves as committed or core students. If they are showing up, they are hoping to grow in their skill as a follower of Jesus. Doug Fields affirms, “When opportunities arise or when you need to challenge students, don’t

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<sup>81</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 152.

<sup>82</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, 152-53.

<sup>83</sup> Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 1997), 301.

<sup>84</sup> Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 297-98.



be afraid to nudge them. That's a necessary part of the disciple-making process—to lovingly point them toward Christ or to challenge them to develop new habits. Students expect you to ask about their spiritual lives, their prayer requests, their home life, what they did on their dates, and so on.”<sup>85</sup> And so within our Grad Prep Program, we are set up to do just that.

### The Core Competency of Leadership

Perhaps one of the best ways to build up our students in the task of discipleship is to involve them in leadership. Many people have drawn a direct correlation between the way that one grows in his faith and his role in leadership. The Sticky Faith research points out that the “more teenagers serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick.”<sup>86</sup> I know this dynamic is true for my own personal faith story – and many of the young people who I have worked with. When others see leadership potential and involve them in the lives of younger disciples, growth is inspired. This is why the authors of As Iron Sharpens Iron point out that each of us (for all of our lives) need a younger believer to mentor (“a Timothy”), because it actually sharpens our own faith.<sup>87</sup> I love the layers of this approach to mentoring because it resembles a three dimensional picture of relational constellations. Not only should everyone have a “Timothy” (a younger believer to encourage), but each of us should also have a “Paul” (a more mature believer to encourage us) as well as a “Barnabas” (the safe, spiritual friend who can be a peer accountability partner).<sup>88</sup> These layers of relationships

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<sup>85</sup> Fields, *Your First Two Years in Youth Ministry*, Kindle locations 1672-75.

<sup>86</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle location 1079.

<sup>87</sup> Howard and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2009), 182-83.

<sup>88</sup> Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron*, 32.

sharpen us as leaders in different ways. We must always remember that Jesus sent out his disciples two by two! (Mark 6:7, Luke 10:1)

In that same vein, Tom Butler is quoted in Ministry by Teenagers as saying, “We have a leadership program, but leadership is almost a misnomer—the real purpose of this group is discipleship through leadership.”<sup>89</sup> Whether we are challenging our young people to teach other young people, take a direct guiding role in ministry events or programs, or just affirming their roles as servants, their faith is being built up as they lead. Building such opportunities is truly rewarding, but can also be one of the most “complex and problematic pieces of a thriving youth ministry.”<sup>90</sup> It is challenging because they will more deeply develop their skill level not when they are “asked to plan the calendar or evaluate the quality of this or that program,” but instead when they get “life-on-life, uncomfortable ministry experiences that allow them to feel awkward enough to inspire their growth.”<sup>91</sup> As we considered earlier, moving our students from consumers to empowered really means helping them develop competencies of maturity that prepare them to launch as faithful leaders.<sup>92</sup>

Another key piece of this leadership potential to complement our grad prep season would be the overall church’s message about involving students in leading. This must be part of the overall vision for connecting the dots in community for each congregation. The goal isn’t just a strong youth program that people can brag about to the wider community; it is the bolstering of an intentional strategy that includes intergenerational settings where students are both affirmed as growing disciples and given actual roles in

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<sup>89</sup> McKee, *Connect*, Kindle Locations 2213-2214.

<sup>90</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 172-73.

<sup>91</sup> DeVries, *Sustainable Youth Ministry*, 174.

<sup>92</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 237-60.

that church to put their leadership skills into practice. A powerful statement is made by a church that declares, “We believe you are a leader today, not a ‘future’ leader or a ‘young’ leader, but a real leader today” insisting that these young people “are and can be effective leaders even while living through the issues and transitions of adolescence.”<sup>93</sup> Growing in these abilities with such spoken encouragement can have an amazing impact for the faith of that student for the long haul, giving her confidence to live out and own her faith, and even grow in a greater sense of personal vocation as she seeks out her career path.<sup>94</sup>

These congregational opportunities to lead and serve must be, however, genuine tasks that make a difference. Jim Burns gives four qualities of the kinds of responsibilities and opportunities that develop leadership in our students.

- 1) They are meaningful.
- 2) They are gift appropriate.
- 3) They are timely.
- 4) They are challenging.<sup>95</sup>

None of us grows unless we are challenged, so being stretched is part of the journey of a leader. Also, if there is no sense of urgency to the role we could play or if there isn’t care given to helping my role be a good fit with my personality or the task is just a token chore that can now be accomplished by “cheap labor,” a deliberate nurturing of faith competencies is lacking and may actually do more harm than good.<sup>96</sup> One youth pastor (quoted in Youth Ministry: What’s Wrong & How to Get it Right) illustrates the power and potential of inspiring student leadership:

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<sup>93</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 1822-1824.

<sup>94</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle location 1827.

<sup>95</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 35.

<sup>96</sup> Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 35.

I believe the key to keeping students from checking out on the church is to not check out on them as seniors. Putting a high emphasis on keeping seniors connected through service and intentional leadership opportunities is paramount. I cannot remember anything my youth pastor ever said in a program talk. What I do remember is her allowing me to lead worship as a young guitar player. I was allowed to succeed and fail, and that was the very thing that helped me grow and stay committed to my faith. Combining student involvement and involvement in the church as a whole – and not just in the student ministry – is the best recipe for a student being committed for the long haul.<sup>97</sup>

David Olshine reinforces this story by declaring, ““If we want to stop the spiritual drifting following high school, servanthood and leading are the best remedies and antidotes to this ongoing problem of students falling apart following high school.”<sup>98</sup> And this very personal narrative exemplifies what the research has seen repeated: Any church committed to the goal of helping students transition into their young adult years without graduating from their faith must find ways for leadership and involvement to be part of their ministry plan, their own personal congregational “recipe.” This was true of the Exemplary Youth Ministry study as they found congregations of all shapes and sizes producing students with durable faith through the involvement of youth in leadership, further affirming the significance of their roles by “providing resources and training” for all ministries in their church.<sup>99</sup>

This kind of congregational commitment can ultimately lead to another phase of prepared faith: ownership. Doug Fields states the obvious by directing this challenge to the students themselves: “When you show up at your youth ministry, you make a choice to be a consumer (where you are served by others) or a minister (where you serve

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<sup>97</sup> David Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2013), Kindle locations 2253.

<sup>98</sup> Olshine, *Youth Ministry: What's Wrong*, Kindle locations 2249-2250.

<sup>99</sup> Roberto, Black, and Martinson, *The Spirit and Culture of Youth Ministry*, Kindle Locations 3959-3961.

others).”<sup>100</sup> This vision must saturate the culture of a church and its youth ministry so that it can be emphasized repeatedly that younger generation is a gift to the entire congregation and its ministry. The authors of Consuming Youth rightly assert that each congregation must adjust for itself their own sense of definition of youth, “seeing teenagers not as problems to be solved but as people with capacity...Not consumers, but contributors!”<sup>101</sup> This kind of vision really prepares faith for true ownership.

#### The Core Competency of Ownership

The fourth area of improvement related to adjustments to the Grad Prep Program relates to the creation of more specific means to help students consider what owning their faith looks like in the season following graduation. At a very practical level, this requires a greater intention to repeated themes of personal responsibility. But moreover, it entails looking for multiple ways to communicate to the students that faith ownership comes from raising the bar and expecting great things from their faith *before* high school so they will truly have faith *after* high school.

Jonathan McKee wonders, “Could it be that today’s youth ministries are too focused on offering ministry TO teenagers instead of developing ministry BY teenagers? Maybe our ‘entertain me’ programming mind-set has lowered the bar for many teens. Come, laugh, sing, listen, pray, exit. What if we raise our expectations just a little?”<sup>102</sup> Raising the bar in numerous ways affects the culture of the entire congregation and not just the youth ministry. If we want to be about the business of creating faithful ministry to launch faithful kids, such intentionality and focus on ownership needs to happen.

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<sup>100</sup> Doug Fields, *Help, I’m a Student Leader!* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 23.

<sup>101</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle Locations 936-40.

<sup>102</sup> Jonathan McKee and David R. Smith, *Ministry by Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle Locations 135-40.

One significant piece of ownership relates to the students having a sense of making their youth ministry program and experiences their own during their high school years. As I mentioned earlier, my youth group had the privilege of preparing a workshop entitled “Student Owned Ministry=Student Owned Faith” at a leadership conference and I really had no idea how much the truth of that statement would be lived out in the faith lives of those upperclassmen over the next couple of years. Not only did we see an intensification of a feeling of possession that this was indeed “their youth group,” I also watched a higher proportion of these students go into ministry leadership on their campus. This simply justifies Jim Burns’ statement: “The best youth ministry happens when you give students ownership. The only way for them to grow in ministry and leadership is to let them lead with you...Our job is to equip and empower our students for ministry.”<sup>103</sup>

Much about this kind of empowerment has to do with the expectations we set of our upperclassmen while they are with us, as well as preparing them with expectations about faith challenges for after high school. As the “Ready or Not” survey highlights, time and energy given to prep programs do seem to help student in being literally prepared with experiences that line up with their expectations. Going into this season with their eyes open to the struggles that may potentially come their way is one aspect of faith ownership that is a real gift of the Grad Prep Program. While it is much more than just a list of “things you should know,” students are forced to imagine their faith without the same kind of network of faith support close in proximity. Ownership takes personally a shift to this new season.

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<sup>103</sup>Burns, *Uncommon Youth Ministry*, 118-19.

In my own story, a lack of preparation and ownership led to being blindsided by the faith melees that came with heading off to college. Actually, Keith's story in the opening chapter (the young man who went off expecting college to be like youth group) is specifically my story. Most precisely, my expectations were so far off from reality that it so discombobulated me that it took years to recover.

With an emphasis on ownership within the Grad Prep Program, we can avoid (to some extent) such discouragement. As we use tools like the College Church Connection to clearly declare that connection to faith community in this next season of life is an essential part of faith ownership – and will most likely be the most significant area of preparation that a student can do.

But something this important cannot just be set on the shoulders of those about to graduate. The entire youth program must reiterate this message in multiple ways. Again, from a competency perspective, we need to make connecting teens to the wider church a priority before they graduate so that they can have memories and patterns to follow as they move forward. Mark DeVries says it like this:

Youth programs that emphasize student leadership without connecting those teenagers to an ongoing community of faith deprive the young people of the very relationships that can most effectively lead them to Christian maturity. But undergirded by Christian families and the extended family of the church, those same student leadership programs can greatly enhance a young person's growth in Christ.<sup>104</sup>

Again, we see the mingling of the themes of this thesis. Intergenerational community connecting the dots like a family leads and models what deeper discipleship looks like. And thus leadership opportunities become faith ownership opportunities (as we just read above.)

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<sup>104</sup> Mark DeVries, *Family-Based Youth Ministry* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 142.

To make the most out of the Grad Prep Program, detailed improvements around relationship, discipleship, leadership, and ownership will help launch our students with more confidence and competencies for the next season. They will be sailing into this great big sea of early adulthood on these “ships,” and will be better prepared because of our commitment and vision for them. It cannot be emphasized enough about the initial start of their journey. The *Sticky Faith* authors declare:

The first two weeks of college set the trajectory for the next few years. Over and over, students told us that the first two weeks at college are when many key decisions are made—about drinking and other high-risk behaviors, right along with choosing whether to go to church or campus ministry. Many of these decisions are influenced by the new friends freshmen surround themselves with and the new situations in which they put themselves. Most students are totally unprepared for the intensity of those first days and weeks, and have no strategy for how to make decisions during that critical time.<sup>105</sup>

If we have helped our students “ready their ships,” then stronger competencies are in place. Realistic expectations have been set and they will discover that “prepped faith is the best faith!”

Kinnaman (and others) rightly remind us that going off to college is not an “automatic faith killer,” but the difficulties must be addressed as students land on campus.<sup>106</sup> Kinnaman goes on to underscore that many students do thrive with their faith during their college years, but he reminds that “one of the marks of these individuals is a meaningful connection to some form of Christian community— whether a worshiping congregation, a Christian campus group, or a Christian-oriented college— which makes them less likely to become nomadic or prodigal. The key here is a meaningful connection, not merely showing up at religious activities.”<sup>107</sup> If meaningful connection

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<sup>105</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle Locations 2592-2597.

<sup>106</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle location 2326.

<sup>107</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 2326-2331.



has been part of the young person's experience while they have been growing up in our youth groups and churches – and then set as an expectation for the next season – then our students will be equipped to navigate the rough seas ahead with more confidence.

You might remember this quote from a college student about the difficulties about the rough waters – and how it relates to setting expectations. This college senior interviewed in *Sticky Faith* recalls:

Transitioning out of high school into college is like you're leaving on a giant cruise ship. You're heading out of this harbor and everyone's waving you off. Let's say this ship is your faith. As soon as you start sailing out to this new port called college, you realize you're in a dingy. You don't have this huge ship, and you're completely not prepared, and your boat is sinking! Unless there's someone with a life raft who's ready to say, "We got you. Come right here. This is where you can be, and this is where you can grow," you're done.<sup>108</sup>

Our young people intuitively know (and hear from older friends) that challenges await them, but we need to serve them best by letting them know that they need not go at it alone; they need to sail with others! By connecting the dots in community for these students while they are in high school, they'll best know how to do that for themselves in the next season. Again, our messaging is vital. Derek Melleby humorously relates:

David was about to head off to college, and at one point in our conversation he said, "All the advice I was given at graduation only told me what not to do: don't get drunk, don't have sex! I need to know what to do." I took a bite of my s'more and thought, He's right. The message most college-bound students hear is negative. It goes something like this: College is a dangerous place. Students spend their time binge drinking, doing drugs, and hooking up, and many Christians lose their faith. Christian students need to keep and defend their faith if they are going to be able to survive the attacks from professors and peers. The picture is grim. There is some truth to this scenario, But if there is one message that I hope gets through in this book, it is this: Christian students should not fear college.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 155-59.

<sup>109</sup> Melleby, *Make College Count*, Kindle location 67.

Fear-driven ministry ultimately sells short both our faith in God and our young people themselves. Certainly the challenges are unsettling, but we have patterns before us that we can communicate to help settle our young disciples. Melleby further reflects key aspects of this thesis in his own personal testimony:

I don't think I would have come out of college with my faith intact if it hadn't been for two things. One was the strong foundation my parents and church had built in me growing up. Going into college, knowing why I believed what I did was paramount to making wise decisions while I was there. Secondly, finding a group of friends who believed like I did and made it a point to participate in faith-developing activities helped solidify my identity as a Christian. Knowing that I was not alone made me more confident in who I was and more able to grow in and share my faith.<sup>110</sup>

These “two things” are truly a beautiful summary of the heart of this project: a foundation of faith formed in a young person's family and home church, as well as a building up of a constellation of faithful people to keep encouraging faith during this challenging season! So let's become so deliberate in driving home these two things that our students can repeat them by rote. Connecting the dots in community is giving young people such an experience of inspired personal faith ownership anchored in Christian community in high school in such a way that they are practiced enough to go and create that for themselves in the next phase of life.

By guiding our students do just this, we help them develop strong faith competencies and craft their own personalized spiritual formation plan around an understanding that their faith must become their own. With such a perspective in place – and supported by their parents and surrounded by their faith community – the hope that they can be awakened to their need for fellowship can become ablaze. And when this happens, such a Grad Prep Program would work in tandem with a youth ministry that is

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<sup>110</sup> Melleby, *Make College Count*, Kindle locations 678-82.

focused on transitioning students with confidence in the next season. And in the context of our parents being empowered and our congregations being committed to live out their own God-given role to be the wider family of faith, community can at last be found!

## CONCLUSION

### “A NEW Normal”

“The good news, however, is that the church is uniquely called to be the community of God— and true, authentic community banishes isolation, loneliness, and alienation and replaces them with love. What will have to change about how we ‘do ministry’ to meet the needs of the ‘new normal’?”

– David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*

What is our congregational commitment to properly preparing our students to transition from our youth ministries without graduating from our faith? How will we move beyond just talking about the problem and actually become part of the proactive solution? What best illustrates our level of confidence in the life-giving “sticky-ness” of following Jesus throughout our entire lives with a faith that is anchored in community? And in what ways does this awakening to fellowship actually bless and encourage the wider church as well? All of these questions lead us to seek a “new normal” – a changing of the cultural default, a massive paradigm shift within our congregations that quits talking about true, authentic community and starts living it. So, how would we know if such a philosophical shift was actually taking place?

Consider this illustration. It is the springtime and two different congregations are sending off their graduates on a “Senior Sunday.” Listen to these two very different godsend prayers seeking to bless their seniors before their graduations:

SCENARIO 1: “Dear Jesus, please don’t let this dear child Christie lose her sanity, sobriety, and virginity all in the first week of college. Please, dear Lord, spread it out over time. Amen”

SCENARIO 2: “Dear Jesus, please empower Christie to be sent into the world as a missionary. Cause her to remember all that she has been taught by her family and her family of faith about what trusting you means, what relying on your grace looks like, and let her use her gifts to joyfully serve you. Go before her to prepare a ‘family of faith’ for her to journey with so that she might be encouraged to continue to become the woman of God you have created her to be. And help her to remember that this church will remain her ‘home base,’ cheering her on and supporting her through our prayers and presence

(even from a distance). Thank you for the privilege of being connected with Christie and her journey. Amen.”

Which prayer best represents the attitude and philosophy of your congregation?

Obviously, this first prayer is hyperbole, but it should cause us to pause and think. Have we so given up the fight for a faith that lives beyond graduation that we pray defeatist prayers that surrender to the impact of the world over the providence of God? Or do we pray with faith believing that we are sending faithful students into a world that so badly needs their witness and vibrant faith? I hope and pray that our congregations reflect the latter prayer – and that across our nation churches become more and more dedicated to something better for our graduates.

That something better, however, can't be more of the same. The realities of the cultural impact on the faith of our students aren't going to become any easier. In fact, these challenges may become even more difficult. But the test of faith isn't about praying for life to get easier. It is about growing a conviction in our young people that knows how to respond to life getting difficult, ready for the times when faith will be challenged. Moreover, making the commitment in our congregations to invest more intentionally in the passing on of a faith formed in community helps our young people rehearse walking through the various crises in life with others there right beside them. Scripture is clear that challenges in life are faith-testing and character-forming. (James 1:2-5, Romans 5:1-5, Philippians 4:4-7) Our focus shouldn't be on our circumstance, but instead on our response.

Several years ago during a particularly fatiguing season of ministry, a dear friend called to tell me that a large tumor was attached to the lining of his lung and heart. He would be having surgery as soon as possible. And then a very small thing happened. In

the midst of this crisis, my wife, Lisa, announced that one of her cousins was going to be visiting with no advanced planning. Something inside me snapped and I had a disproportionate emotional response to having a houseguest. (Translation: I got way too angry!) My friend's surgery went well, the tumor was benign and the cousin's visit was no problem. As I processed my reaction to this collision of life circumstances with my counselor soon after, he had a profound answer: "Cancer and cousins will come. The thing that matters is this: How will you respond?" That is the key question we need to prepare our students to be ready to answer when they are launched into life. The Christian journey is not one without hardship or struggle; quite the opposite. But we have a savior who sympathizes with us in our hurt and promises to never leave us. (Hebrews 4:15)

Hurt happens. In a recent Disney movie, *Big Hero Six*, the teenage lead character, Hiro is grieving the death of his brother Tadashi. Both are genius robot inventors, but it is Tadashi that invented Baymax, a personal healthcare companion shaped like a marshmallow. In the midst of Hiro's sorrow, Baymax diagnoses the young man's emotional pain in the following dialogue:

Baymax: "It is alright to cry...Crying is a natural response to pain."

Baymax then scans Hiro.

Baymax: "Your hormone and neuron transmitter levels indicate that you are experiencing mood swings, common to adolescence. Diagnosis: Puberty!"

After a couple comical comments, Baymax continues: "I see no evidence of physical injury."

Hiro: "It's a different kind of hurt."

Baymax: "You are my patient, I would like to help."

Hiro: "You can't fix this one buddy."

Baymax then downloads a database on personal loss.

Baymax: “Treatments include contact with friends and loved ones.” (And a picture of a constellation pops up on the screen!) “I am contacting them now. Your friends have been contacted.”

Baymax then reaches out to touch Hiro and continues: “Offer compassion and physical reassurance... You will be alright, There, there. I am sorry about the fire.”

Later, when Hiro’s friends show up, one character pleads, “No don’t push us away, Hiro. We are here for you, that’s why Baymax contacted us.”<sup>1</sup>

While this scene is from an animated film, it tenderly expresses the truth of each of our experience – and the thrust of this thesis – we need each other!

For our students, college and career and life transition and even hurt will come. How will they respond? Or to correlate to the thrust of our strategy: How will they have been equipped to respond? How much confidence will they have? What competencies will they be able to utilize to deal with these challenges? Do they know that God has intended for them to meet each and every challenge in the context of community? I believe that the answers to these questions will be determined in great degree by the very ministry philosophy that their congregation has intentionally adopted and been committed to. The nurture of that student’s faith within his own nuclear family context will obviously also play an important role in how he responds.

As I have reflected, most churches are stuck in a rut, lacking a clear articulation of the kind of faith that they desire to have in their graduates. They don’t have a specific plan of how to structure their youth and children’s ministries that inspires lasting faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Adsit and Ryan Potter. *Big Hero Six*. Directed by Don Hall and Chris Williams. Burbank, CA: Walt Disney Animation Studios, 2014.

Nor have they compelled parents in the congregation to take seriously their role as the primary faith influence in the lives of their young people.

If congregations truly desire to get un-stuck in meeting the trial of so many students shelving their faith during their college years, we need to take seriously our call to articulate a ministry philosophy that equips our students to learn to connect the dots of their own faith in the context of community. For too long, youth pastors and congregations have focused on making youth “look good” from the outside. *“Keep them plugged into youth group!” “Get them up in front of the congregation to sing a song!” “Have them share about their mission trip experience!” “Get lots of good pictures of happy, healthy teens for the church website!”*

Obviously, all of these things are not bad in and of themselves, but if they come at the cost of neglecting what has really been planted on the inside of our graduates, we will soon discover that the faith that is on the inside of our graduates is not mature enough to withstand the trauma of being transplanted into a new environment during the college years.

I am reminded of the first time that I bought a piñata for an event. As I hung the multi-colored piñata, I noticed that it was much lighter than I imagined it should be, but we proceeded. After a few hits, the cardboard shell shattered into several large chunks and nothing came out of the piñata! I did not know that you have to fill your own piñata with candy! Nothing kills a piñata party as quickly as an empty, candy-less piñata. (C’mon, you’ve done it too! It didn’t come with instructions!)

It is a hard question to consider, but have our congregations invested in empty piñatas? Have we settled for dressing our seniors up for a “grad blessing” and “oohed”



and “aahed” over how good they look and thought very little about what is on the inside? It is what is on the inside that matters most and it will be the faith of these young people that needs to be intentionally built up for them to stay strong in the years after graduation. For many during their college years, they will take some hard hits to their faith and their values. What will show from the inside during these trials?

Their sense of both a personal and vibrant relationship built on the grace of Jesus Christ as Lord *and* their experience of a personal and vibrant web of mutually encouraging relationships with other believers encouraging them in the way. And because faith is an ongoing process, the commitment to becoming the architect of their own third constellation will set the proper relational environment of community that will help their faith continue to grow. For our congregations and our families, we need to find effective ways to summarize all of these issues. And perhaps the best way to get started is to share a fact that all adults need to hear.

**It's a Fact: Most Kids Want Adults in Their Lives!**

One of the most exciting and repeated findings seen in the research regarding adolescents today is this fact: Young people *want* to have relationships with the older mentors and adults!<sup>2</sup> They are so aching for significant relationships – and the church has (and *is*) the answer! The great irony is that the adults of the church wrongly assume otherwise.<sup>3</sup> Even parents make the sober mistake of supposing that their influence – in matters of faith and life – has practically disappeared during the teenage years, but this

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<sup>2</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), Kindle locations 2788-89.

<sup>3</sup> Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 1092-94.

couldn't be further from the truth.<sup>4</sup> The true question really is not whether our influence remains as caring adults in the lives of students; it is, moreover, will our impact – especially in matters of faith and life – be positive or negative.<sup>5</sup>

Young people want real community, real authenticity, real friendship. The research of *Sticky Faith* found that college freshmen reported the three most significant things about their youth group were: 1. The adults involved 2. The community formed 3. Friendships.<sup>6</sup> The researchers go on to say that young people in this season don't want to be “out of sight, out of mind;” in fact, they possess a much more durable faith if at least one adult from their home church contacts them during the first semester of college.<sup>7</sup>

Like all of us, these relational creatures are just as God planned them to be, built for community and they sense it, they desire it. The world, however, is always trying to sell them cheap imitations of connections. For those struggling with loneliness, though, a weak connection is still a connection. As the church, we have so much more to offer. And Christian fellowship is not only the God-given antidote for isolation (“God sets the lonely in families.” Psalm 68:6, NIV), it is also the perfect “launching pad” for our young believers as they prepare for the next season in life. Researcher after researcher asserts that this fact cannot be overestimated.<sup>8</sup>

The strongest determining factor of ongoing faith development (Powell calls it the closest thing to the “silver bullet”) is this: “High school and college students who experience more intergenerational worship tend to have higher faith maturity...The more

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<sup>4</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 1101-29.

<sup>5</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 658-59.

<sup>6</sup> Kara Powell, Brad M. Griffen, and Cheryl A. Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 2168-72.

<sup>7</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1125-28.

<sup>8</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 5358-59.

teenagers serve and build relationships with younger children, the more likely it is that their faith will stick.”<sup>9</sup> Relationships in a church with those folks both older *and* younger are key. And it looks a lot like “family,” doesn’t it?

For mistaken reasons, then, often the older generations are quick to disparage the younger generation. Chuck Bomar appraises, “It’s easy for those of us with more years behind us to criticize younger generations rather than to walk lovingly alongside them. I believe this is mostly due to a lack of understanding and perspective— and it’s a loss for both sides.”<sup>10</sup> Even for those elders who desire to reach out to students today, many become discouraged because of the cross-cultural experience. Is it really too idealistic for these connections to happen? Are there truly “too many obstacles to overcome in order for relationships between generations to work?”<sup>11</sup> I think the truth is that the benefits far outweigh the obstacles if we are guided in the work.

I was having a rather intense conversation with a ministry peer and we were again lamenting the lack of intentionality found in our churches and families to nurture and encourage such connections. The line of our discussion (did I mention it was intense?) went something like this:

Why do we have “financial planners” for our 401k, “work-out trainers” for our physical fitness, “health coaches” for our nutrition, “guidance counselors” for our academic careers, etc. and very little (no?) holistic planning for the spiritual formation of our children? *WHO* in the world is being responsible for the “planning” and intentionality of the faith of our own children?

In a follow-up conversation with another contemporary, my friend Willy conjectured that we should have spiritual “I.E.P.s” for our kids! (That’s “Individualized Educational

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<sup>9</sup> Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, Kindle locations 1076-79.

<sup>10</sup> Chuck Bomar, *Worlds Apart* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 28-30.

<sup>11</sup> Bomar, *Worlds Apart*, Kindle locations 1768-73.

Programs.”) I love that idea because it gathers a network of supportive adults who bring their individual expertise together and creates a plan for growth in partnership with the student himself!

So, what is it going to take in terms of time and energy from the adults who want to step into the fray with our young people? Certainly such an investment is going to be so overwhelming and intimidating that only the “few and the proud” could join, right?

Not so! In fact, in a study cited in *Consuming Youth*, listen to their conclusions:

While the students had no difficulty recalling adults who had made huge impacts, what the professor was most struck with was just how little these adults needed to do to have an impact. The students shared story after story of teachers or coaches or other adults who pulled them aside after class or practice for what was typically a conversation of twenty minutes or less. A follow-up on a question, an affirmation, simply checking in, or a simple “way to go” was all it was usually. While these were relationships sustained over time (think of all those adults who could do this again and again and again within the parish or congregation), the life and impact often came in those short hallway chats. It didn’t take all that much time, and yet the modest involvement of these adults made a huge difference. This ought to inspire and provide hope for any adult that connecting with youth is not always a daunting and consuming endeavor but rather is often within reach.<sup>12</sup>

A “conversation of twenty minutes or less?” Truly there is hope! We have tools to equip our parents and congregational members and even youth themselves. Listening, praying, expressing compassion (which means to “suffer with”) – all are effective tools. If you are bold enough to believe that young people still want fellowship and influence from their elders, Chap Clark has this simple advice:

The only qualification an adult needs is the willingness and fortitude to authentically care. Once this foundation is laid, adults can focus on the three specific needs of midadolescents: Youth need refocused, nurturing organizations and programs. Youth need a stable and secure loving presence. Youth need to experience authentic, intimate relationships with adults.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> John Berard, James Penner, and Rick Bartlett, *Consuming Youth: Navigating Youth from Being Consumers to Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Kindle locations 1936-43.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4245-50.

But again, this can't just be one superstar adult who is constantly going to heroic lengths to save a kid or fix his problems. (In fact, such overactive surrogate parenting might actually stifle the growth of an adolescent.) A constellation is only a constellation if there are multiple stars. Clark continues his prescription for restoring adults to a trustworthy status in the eyes of young people by stating:

The only way we can stem the tide of the consequences of abandonment is to encourage a wide variety of adults to take part in the lives of the young. Nothing else will make a difference—not more baseball fields, more programs and events, or more job opportunities. Because the root of the issues related to contemporary adolescence has to do with leaving this age group to flounder on its own, the answer is relationships with adults who sincerely care. That is the most fundamental need of this abandoned generation.<sup>14</sup>

Relational investment as a congregation ultimately has to be lived out in practical steps. To review, once a ministry vision is truly owned by a congregation, the culture of the congregation then needs to be addressed. It has been wisely said that when a culture shift is needed, we are “talking about changing the default.”<sup>15</sup> Often this means training people to slow down long enough to not jump to faulty conclusions about our interactions around us. These steps are sometimes minute, but the difference made can be immense. This is true even for parents who also feel like there are insurmountable walls up between themselves and their children. Chuck Bomar again offers a deeper reality as he writes, “Your child desires a relationship with you. There might be some obstacles for you here. Most children have crept away from you relationally, at least to some degree, throughout middle and high school,” but we cannot give up hope or give up trying to connect.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 4337-41.

<sup>15</sup> Wayne Cordeiro and Robert Lewis, *Culture Shift* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), 53.

<sup>16</sup> Bomar, *Worlds Apart*, Kindle locations 1738-40.

Perhaps you still don't buy the argument that kids desire to have adults in their lives. In your own experience of young people, you may perceive them to be aloof or even disrespectful to the older generations. You might be among the crowd that mutters in frustration, "Kids these days!" Well, my friend, I must caution you about being quick to judge things from the outside. Our young people are so used to be held up to a high performance standard that they expect such quick and harsh judgment to come down from the older generation. And while this culture spends so much time, energy, and money on dressing up the outside, when it comes to where their deep need is, we should pause and consider what is beneath the surface.

When our kids were little, we were often quite neglectful of our yard work. We had two children under three when we moved into our new house. The bushes out front were growing even faster than our fast growing toddlers! One day our family was geared up, stroller and all, for a walk to the park. Heading out on the sidewalk, those creeping bushes angrily confronted us, leaving us only half a sidewalk. I sighed.

Several steps later we were met on the sidewalk by another mom and baby heading in the opposite direction out for a walk with a stroller themselves. They hadn't seen us coming, but we politely stepped off the half-sidewalk into the grass to let them walk by. She thanked us for our considerate move. I half-grunted, "Man, I wished they'd cut back those bushes so that we can walk on the sidewalk." Our neighbor quickly replied, "Oh, I know! They haven't done a thing with this house since they moved in!" Her speed-walking shifted into a higher gear when I said back, "Yeah, I live here." I'm not sure who was more embarrassed! The one thing I do know is that we are experts in

judging things from the outside! Certainly we could've done a better job with our bushes, but our priority was helping my toddlers grow, not worrying about my bushes growing.

In the same way, older generations might let the cluttered bushes of modern fashion or style set their expectations about the spiritual lives of youth. Coming face to face with an adolescent is a scary proposition for many adults. Many of these kids stand like ominous abandoned store fronts, with the sign reading, "Closed!" While I think that this is an accurate first impression, these adults are unfortunately misreading the real sign that hangs in their window, "Open for business...if you really care about me!" There needs to be proof we as adults care for the teen as a person, not just a "home improvement project."

If we are serious enough to invest in the emerging generation, we must start now. Time is of the essence and it is never too late to make even minor changes within our churches. And at the same time, it's never too early for churches to think with a long-term perspective on the trajectory of faith of our young people. If I have become too comfortable as a youth pastor just enjoying the high school days with my students, my short-sightedness will do little to really prepare them. Duffy Robbins maintains, "We tend to forget that within a few years, the kids we're working with now won't have the youth group. All they will have is God."<sup>17</sup> But having God is a great thing, especially if that relationship has been nurtured by godly people who have modeled and inspired a commitment to community. Most certainly there is much more to be settled and resolved, and that is the important work that each congregation needs to wrestle with. However, the following serves as a reminder that could serve as a primer for any church that wants to

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<sup>17</sup> Duffy Robbins, *Building a Youth Ministry that Builds Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), Kindle location 1349.

begin the vital work of connecting the dots in community for their students and congregation.

### **A Ministry Vision that Seeks to Connect the Dots in Community**

We have already surveyed the landscape of the dominant culture of our day which continues to instill an ethic of individualistic pursuits, even affecting the way we pursue our faith in Jesus Christ. This leads to several dire outcomes. Community is a lost concept in many of our churches. For a variety of prevalent reasons, our congregations reflect this over-personalized faith mindset in their own settings and produce stuck models of doing ministry that has not inspired students beyond high school to have lasting faith. Many of our parents are uncertain of how to fulfill their spiritual responsibility in the lives of their children. And too many youth ministry programs are unfocused on thinking about the key tasks necessary to transition students with an owned faith that survives.

But with a solid foundation on a scriptural basis for full-bodied community lived out while we have our young in our midst, we can develop a vibrant ministry vision that relationally invests in a congregational commitment to prepare students to transition from high school without graduating from their faith. The task of this conclusion is to reiterate the summary of such a vision. This vision needs to be built upon solid footings of an intentional ministry vision, lived out in the very culture and practice of a congregation. This vision must drive people across generations to relationally invest in each other and in the emerging generation. Such a congregational commitment will have an end-goal of training and preparation for the students to find and even make faith community on their own during the next season of their life.



This approach cannot simply be an add-on option that ebbs and flows with various events and programs; it must be a priority agenda that is found at the heart of a church's desire to embody the healthiest spiritual community possible – again, it comes as a drastic paradigm shift. This would lead to a church that relationally connects the dots between its members, truly forming a spiritual safety net of family for all. And in the process of this, youth are raised up in an immersion experience where they have learned to value Christian community and their need for fellowship from their earliest days.

The essential foundation of such a vision will need to be bolstered by a full-fledged plan to achieve and sustain such a vision for the long haul through three significant steps.

First, bringing awareness of this vital issue to the entire congregation at large must be accompanied by a clear understanding of the call of Scripture to community and a full grasp of the cultural dynamics that are in play in the lives of our young.

Second, investing in a congregation-wide commitment of both personal investment of time and energy among its members must be accepted and embraced, along with the exercise of reevaluating ministry systems and structures that might be adjusted to better nurture community.

Third, building a culture of equipping our youth to truly prepare themselves for the transition after high school must be accomplished through a variety of discipleship efforts. These efforts must include an active partnership between parents and parish to ensure that our students have been actually practicing critical community forming skills while they are still among us. This will become a ministry designed to help members identify specific ways to be part of the solution, all the while constantly reminding

ourselves that the students themselves do want significant relationships with adults in their lives. Also, the path to personal faith ownership must be clearly articulated and encouraged in a variety of ways, always fostered in the framework of faith community. Finally, significant training resources will need to be developed to safeguard a comprehensive sense of preparation to be sent as faithful followers of Christ into the world after graduation.

### **Bringing Awareness**

As Christians who care about our kids, it is our duty to help our churches see the realities of the drastic loss of faith among the young people who have grown up in our communities. We also must bring a much greater awareness of the various cultural undercurrents affecting this challenge, as well as lift up the biblical mandate to literally “flesh out” life-giving community in our ministries. But this awareness must come in ways beyond listing statistics and demographic studies. It must be accompanied by personal stories, testimonies that bring home the stark struggle of this season of life.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, we need to hear stories of young people who have hung on to faith and discover the things that made the difference for them. There are good stories to tell, as again illustrated by David Kinnaman, who writes:

Millions of young Christians get through college with a flourishing faith. One of the marks of these individuals is a meaningful connection to some form of Christian community— whether a worshiping congregation, a Christian campus group, or a Christian-oriented college— which makes them less likely to become nomadic or prodigal. The key here is a meaningful connection, not merely showing up at religious activities.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book Group, 2011), Kindle locations 1431-32.

<sup>19</sup> Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, Kindle locations 2326-31.

Reflecting on exactly what facilitates “meaningful connection” requires awareness and evaluation. When we do hear a story that celebrates the way in which fellowship was significant and formative, that congregation would be wise to affirm its members for their faithfulness and reinforce the relational value that was being lived out.

Parents, too, have much to gain from becoming more familiar with the many resources available to assist in our appreciation for the challenges facing the younger generation. While many families are simply overwhelmed with schedule constraints, financial difficulties, and relational tension, educating oneself about youth culture is a small price for a parent to pay. In fact, Chap Clark imparts a clear and concise vision of parenting by writing, “Parents must commit to two vital strategies in leading and loving their midadolescent children: first, to understanding them and their world, and second, to providing them with safe and secure boundaries while still allowing them the necessary room to grow.”<sup>20</sup>

Of course, these two steps are much easier said than done. But many parents would find a great deal of empowerment with such a summary of the task of parenting. Striving for a compassionate understanding of the present circumstances of this generation – while withholding immediate judgment calls – allows for adults to see the world through their experience. This very well could lead to a healthy restructuring of our perspective on youth today, and ultimately expose the bigger picture that nurturing “strong and deep connections between youth, adults, and the adult world determine not only how teens behave but who they become.”<sup>21</sup> There is a great deal that can be gained for all through bringing greater awareness of the world our young people are growing up

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<sup>20</sup> Clark, *Hurt 2.0*, Kindle locations 2354-57.

<sup>21</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle location 995.

in, going hand in hand with a reengagement of the biblical imperatives to be community as previously surveyed.

### **Investing in a Congregational Commitment**

Gaining greater awareness leads us to a greater desire for a timely and effective response. As families and congregations committing to something better for our graduates, we must find ways to personally invest in being part of the solution. This kind of commitment would lead beyond just stating values such as young people matter, family faith matters, intergenerational relationships matter, intentional ministry programming matters, and training for lifelong faith matters. Until our commitment leads us to action, a list like this will remain only values to aspire to, not values we are practically personifying.

We often hear people declare that “children are our future” and that the youth are “the church of tomorrow.” Have we really thought through the short-comings of these messages to our kids?

I remember being at a recent Student Leadership Conference in Southern California and hearing author Doug Fields illustrate a vastly different perspective. Doug communicated that the adults in the church need the energy, creativity, impulsiveness, and fearlessness of young people today. I recall vividly watching the body language of my youth group as Fields repeated over and over again, “You are the church of today!” While they had been engaged for the whole conference, the power of Doug’s words were sinking in to these students in such a way that they were leaning forward in their chairs, almost as if they were about to burst forward running. I wouldn’t have been surprised if some students would’ve launched themselves on stage with Doug to jump up and down

in affirmation. The implications of this reality were at once both weighty and freeing for my young friends. Instilled with a tangible sense of empowerment, changes took place in the conversations about our own youth group during that event. They had become more focused on the ownership of their faith. I could tell that the truth of Fields' message opened up new levels of passion with these young people. They were ready to be more committed to deepening their faith once they had a sense that the church was committed to them as well, if the church believed in them in the here and now. The truth is that young people are the church of today, people with a capacity to make an impact for Christ in the world.<sup>22</sup>

How do we get this exact message out to our churches, so that they can demonstrate their readiness to receive these young people as full participants of church life in the present tense? We need to find practical ways to build like-minded commitments as churches and families that will force us to be proactive in being resourceful to dream and design steps for demonstrating our dedication to this end. In big and little ways, in the context of our individual congregations, we will be like Jesus welcoming the little children to bless them. This will lead us to determining the right resources to draw upon and evaluate the things that fit our setting well. There are always plenty of ideas out there, but a congregational commitment must lead the way. Likewise, some sense of a structure of intentional action of getting involvement from a vast array of church members should be depicted and communicated so that a call to commitment can immediately go in tandem with practical ways to demonstrate this commitment.

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<sup>22</sup> Berard, Penner, and Bartlett, *Consuming Youth*, Kindle locations 936-40.

While constructing specific plans for a variety of ways for adults to engage and support young people in their spiritual journeys will be an ongoing process (as highlighted in the practical recommendations), it is critical to have some initial steps that people can make. Calling folks to a commitment without any description of what they are actually committing to can frustrate the very people that you want to become your supporters. Similarly, if the commitment is only a broad statement like “Our Church Cares about Kids” without any tangible action steps, here too momentum can quickly become lost. Initial steps in this regard should follow a relational model that helps adults and young people in the congregation get to know each other by name and by story. Perhaps commencing a prayer partner program or inspiring intergenerational fellowship events that have deliberate moments of connection and sharing would be realistic starting points. Ultimately, it is key to clearly state the expectations in each of these settings for the adults. Including effective times of training and encouragement will only help energize adults to make such connections. It is an incredible thing to see moments like these become contagious and add scores of additional adult allies to the wider support team for strengthening the youth of the church.

### **Building a Culture of Equipping our Students for the Future**

We have known for some time that youth groups do important things for teenagers, providing moral formation, learned competencies, and social and organizational ties. But they seem less effective as catalysts for consequential faith, which is far more likely to take root in the rich relational soil of families, congregations, and mentor relationships where young people can see what faithful lives look like, and encounter the people who love them enacting a larger story of divine care and hope.<sup>23</sup>

– Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian*

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<sup>23</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Almost Christian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), Kindle locations 235-238.

We've heard the echo of Dean's sentiment in several different ways throughout this project. Youth ministry is most definitely one piece of the puzzle, but to see students successfully launch, a larger constellation of support is needed. And to help the individual investments of caring adults bear fruit in such "rich relational soil" for the long haul, it is necessary to build a culture of intentional equipping that includes students, parents, and all adults in the church. Again, the key word is intentional.

I remember very specifically a heated exchange between myself and a pastor during a staff meeting many years ago. When we were discussing the "purpose driven" movement coming out of Saddleback Community Church, my associate railed against the "fad" of being "driven with a purpose." At one point, this pastor blurted, "Do you think most of the ministry is something we do on accident?" I didn't have to answer him. My face betrayed my response. "Yes, absolutely!" I said. Sadly, we are rarely intentional in ministry. We seldom think deeply, theologically, biblically, and developmentally about the *why* behind our *what* and *how* of our ministry programs. I often think about how this conversation convinced me that the work of the Church deserves our focused and purposeful attention.

Now, please don't get me wrong. I do believe that God is the engine behind the work that we do and often he works most powerfully through our brokenness and dysfunction. At the same time, we are called to be wise stewards and leaders in the church. (1 Cor. 4:1-2) With this in mind, the goal to fashion a strategy of equipping the saints for the work of building up community (actually an equally accurate paraphrase of Ephesians 4:12) must be accomplished so that the various segments of the church can be trained up, including the students themselves. As key players see themselves fitting into a

wider constellation of support for our students, this understanding of connected community will motivate our churches to find their place to personally invest. Again, this can't occur in a happenstance way. Each one of us needs to respond to the vital question, "Are you open?"

### **"Are You Open?"**

When we go on retreats and make space for God, we are rarely disappointed. It's also true for those of us who work in ministry – we see how camps and retreats help kids discover and experience God. Many of my own powerful experiences of Jesus have happened on retreats as well. The following story came to my mind when I considered the issue of openness.

We were at a church camp for a spiritual direction class in seminary. After some informal sharing and personal quiet time, we were led through a prayer exercise. The facilitator told us to imagine ourselves walking on a beach all alone, reflecting on the state of our lives. We were then told that we were about to personally meet Jesus on this beach. Jesus was going to have a word for us, a word about the state of our lives. Soft music and beach sounds played from the stereo in the background. Something about being away from the bustle of the city and out in nature made it pretty easy to lose myself in this exercise.

The facilitator continued: "Now you see Jesus in the distance on this beach, walking toward you....but first you look down and discover an object. Pick it up. It represents your life right now and Jesus wants to talk to you about it."

Within my imagination I looked down in the sand and saw a glass mason jar, abandoned in the surf. A wave of shame hit me as I picked it up and imagined the



reaction of Jesus. “Empty? Jesus is going to say that I am empty!” Funny as it is to say, I wanted to run away from my own imagination, to escape that coming encounter with Jesus on the beach. The facilitator spoke softly, “Jesus is face to face with you. What does he say?”

Cringing, I did look up from the jar in my hands to find myself in the presence of the Lord. I don’t remember what he looked like, but I could tell I was with Jesus and I heard his voice. “You are open.” His tone was affirming, loving. “You are open.”

Isn’t that just the way that Jesus works? Our own brokenness and history leads us to a natural default of shame, but Jesus wants to lead us forward with grace. Certainly we have parents of our teens who are feeling spent and empty, terribly discouraged in the midst of the challenges of raising their children. We also have elders in the church who are struggling with their own issues and they might be wondering if they have any “left in the tank” to pour out to an adolescent who doesn’t seem that interested anyway. Even as pastors and youth workers, we have seasons of exhaustion and emptiness where our passion and fire for ministry wanes. If that describes the season you are in right now, it is my hope that you too will hear the encouraging word of Jesus – “You are open.” God can do miracles when there is openness.

May our congregations take seriously the challenge of our day to help families and students connect the dots in community. It’s time to make a declaration for interdependence, for fellowship, and for community. As we have seen, scripture points to community as the context of how our faith grows. While we have only begun to imagine all of the practical implications of maximizing the fierce need for community within our

young people, it is clear that the time is now to respond to this need, to get unstuck as churches, and to help faith stick for the next generation.

### **A Closing Story: “Are You Ready to Get Your Hands Dirty?”**

What does it look like to truly make this investment? I think the following story is a good illustration. After weeks of watching my daughter’s soccer team, it was obvious that a little girl named Ady was the timid underdog of the team. Though she was the coach’s daughter, I wondered how long she might stick with soccer. At the same time, the entire team (and parents) constantly affirmed and encouraged her. In the midst of our second season together, I made an off-handed comment to dear little Ady. “Ady,” I said, “after you make your first goal, I am going to take a big swan dive in the mud to celebrate!” She shared a bright little smile, but I didn’t think too much about it. Each following game, I started cheering even louder for her! I found myself somehow even more motivated to see her succeed. The second season ended with Ady showing improvement, but failing to score a goal.

Fast forward to our next season. The girls continued to love playing together and the parents all loved cheering them on. And again, Ady got lots of special cheers as she took the field. She showed much more intensity. And she played harder. One beautiful morning, Ady was exactly in the right place at the right time to take a missed kick rebound and put it in the net for a goal!

Our entire sideline went wild as Ady raised both of her hands straight up in the air in celebration! (You should see the video! Get your tissues ready!) One parent next to me openly shared my sentiment: “I think I am going to cry!” As she ran off the field, she received a big hug from dad and high fives from her teammates. Then she sprinted

straight to me, “You have to get in the mud!” Again, there was that sparkle and smile. I realized that it would give me the greatest joy to follow through on my promise.

Essentially, I told Ady that I was so committed to cheer her on, so invested in her success that I wouldn’t hesitate to “get down and dirty!” Her smile just got bigger as I launched myself in the midfield mud pit (easy to find in the soggy Northwest). I love seeing that picture and realizing that this image is exactly the kind of challenge that our churches are called to as well.

Each one of our students is aching for a host of cheerleaders to make an relational investment, a commitment in support of her faith. It is the kind of commitment that communicates, “I am willing to get my hands dirty to support you!”

A child’s dedication or baptism often includes a public congregational proclamation of a commitment to “be there” for the child. Despite the warm fuzzies of such celebrations, most adults who declare “we will, by the help of God,” quickly forget their commitment. Certainly, some do become Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders and initiate relationships with the younger generation, but these are often the exception. In fact, Wayne Rice laments the poor habits in our churches that focus on an old model of “getting the kids out of the adults’ hair.”<sup>24</sup> Instead, Rice proposes that “a youth pastor’s job today is just the opposite: bringing the generations together again as a way of getting the kids back into the adults’ hair. Youth pastors are shepherds who help keep the flock together and moving in the same direction.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Wayne Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), Kindle location 1283.

<sup>25</sup> Rice, *Reinventing Youth Ministry Again*, Kindle locations 1284-85.

What would our churches look like if we were serious about “getting kids back into the adults’ hair?” What would it mean to become exceptional in embodying the baptismal commitments we have made? Wouldn’t we be well on our way to being unstuck and getting our hands dirty in the lives of young people, even helping their faith to stick if we found real-world ways to connect with them? In doing so, we become stars in their constellations. The pressure isn’t to become superstars. Students don’t need superstars, they just need cheerleaders. You can help form the congregational constellation and help our students experience what it’s like to be surrounded by support. With such an experience, we’ll create opportunities for our students to practice creating their own constellation for the next season of their Christian journey, convinced of the essential need to be anchored in community, and equipped to make it happen.

One beautiful summer Sunday we were presenting a scholarship to one of our graduates and I asked her to share a few words to the congregation. Emily stepped forward and spoke these words:

I am so thankful to have had all of you guys. When we get baptized here, I love the moment when the pastor turns to the congregation and says, “Will you be the teachers and helpers and help nurture this child?” You have done this so well for me and I am so thankful that you guys have been that for me. That you have been my Sunday school teacher and my VBS leaders. You guys have done so much for me and I will love coming back here. You guys are my home church, thank you!<sup>26</sup>

This eloquently illustrates the power of a congregation’s commitment to the faith of a young person. Emily believed in connecting the dots because she experienced that in her church home, among her church family, and even spoke specifically about heading off to college to find her own community (which she quickly accomplished after only a few

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<sup>26</sup> Caitlin Inman, interview by author, Longview, WA, May 20, 2012.

weeks at college). She is growing and continues in her journey of faith alongside a network of other Christian friends.

Reflecting on that day, I imagine Emily's congregation with sleeves rolled up and their hands dirty from getting involved in Emily's life. They have been connected to her in big and little ways; they share the affection of Christ for her (Philippians 1) as if she was their own child *and*, in a spiritual sense, she is. They have received the double blessing of knowing that Emily believes in community and has taught each of them that they need community too!

By being the community that God has created us to be, we communicate that "you will still be family" even as you leave high school. We will *not* forget about you! Surveys of college students demonstrate that there is a great sense of neglect from many home congregations.<sup>27</sup> Gone and forgotten! But each individual church can not only hope for better for its graduates – it can *be* the hope for emerging generations by truly meeting the community needs within their congregation and re-forming each church's culture to have a solid vision for ministry that leads to lasting faith in our graduates.

This vision will lead parents and parish to understand the stark societal realities facing our young people and to invest in specific ways to surround students with a constellation of support. Students will then be equipped to have the vision of launching into life with a vibrant faith that seeks out their own constellation for the season ahead.

Congregational culture is a hard thing to clearly see, but it is our philosophical framework that will always betray our values and priorities. Each congregation can shift its culture to respond to the needs of our youth. We must make the relational investment

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<sup>27</sup> Powell, Griffen, and Crawford, *Sticky Faith (Youth Worker Edition)*, Kindle locations 1108-10.

necessary, not just for young people like Ady or Emily, but for all young people in our communities. William Romanowski states, “People are not born with a culture, a way of life, but are nurtured into one.”<sup>28</sup>

Let us nurture this emerging generation, then, into a community way of life. Let us raise the bar and see our churches and families take seriously the high calling of scripture to support our children to have lifelong faith. Kenda Creasy Dean claims that we as the church, and its families, are responsible for failing to prepare our youth with a “durable faith.”<sup>29</sup> But it doesn’t have to be the end of the story! As each congregation lives out its commitment to connect the dots, community is built for all, young and old, and faith is strengthened. This goes beyond just having great hope for realizing our need for fellowship, this becomes a greater hope for the church itself. The payoff of such a partnership does more than just benefit young people. God works through relationship in mutually edifying ways, which leads Dean to allege, “If the American church responds, quickly and decisively, to (these) issues raised...then tending the faith of young people may just be the ticket to reclaiming our own.”<sup>30</sup> Amen, amen! That’s exactly the ticket! May it be so and may our fierce need for fellowship and connection within the body be a powerful witness in our world as we send our graduates off as missionaries, transitioning from high school without graduating from their faith.

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<sup>28</sup> William D. Romanowski, *Eyes Wide Open: Looking for God in Popular Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2007), 60.

<sup>29</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle location 91.

<sup>30</sup> Dean, *Almost Christian*, Kindle Location 95.

## **APPENDIX A – Complete Research Report**

### **Doctoral Research Report Details**

*The two surveys are titled as follows:*

#### **Research Report – “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey**

**The Goal of the Study:** *To measure the health of the congregational environment (“spirit and culture”) of Longview Community Church as a whole as it relates to nurturing and encouraging the faith of individual students who grow up in their midst, as well as the level of commitment and support for our emerging model of sustainable youth ministry.*

#### **Research Report – “Ready or Not” Survey**

**The Goal of the Study:** *To measure the difference that a “college/grad prep” program makes with our graduates. By comparing the two test groups (“prepped”=GP students and “non-prepped”=NP students), the conclusions of this study can be used to improve the grad prep process in our setting.*

*The specific recommendations on addressing areas for improvement for both projects will also be offered in the body of the dissertation and have included feedback from key leadership teams at Longview Community Church (including the Board of Directors, Staff, Youth Committee, and Christian Education Committee).*

### **Report Summary and Ministry Recommendations**

#### **Summary of Research:**

##### **Research Report – “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey**

*Longview Community Church is in a very positive place of “Spirit and Culture” to nurture and encourage enduring faith for our youth. We have so much to be grateful for. However, focus is needed on family faith arena and evaluating the potential of ministry collaboration is critical.*

##### **Research Report – “Ready or Not” Survey**

*Grad Prep programs do make a difference in helping students know what to expect related to their faith after graduation.*

In light of the research surveys examined in this report, several ministry recommendations are outlined here:

**Ministry Recommendations:**

- 1) Key ministry leaders and staff should evaluate the wider church's commitment to focus on family faith and intergenerational connections.
  - Highlight existing programs that support family faith and amplify opportunities for greater connections and intentionality
    - Resources for Parents:
      - Communications (Parent Newsletter, Emails, Facebook updates, etc.)
      - Sunday School "take home sheets"
      - Parent Book Club
      - Additional resources
    - Existing Programs:
      - Prayer Partner Program in Youth Ministry
      - Care Packages for Grads
    - Existing Intergenerational Ministry Teams:
      - Contemporary Worship Song Team
      - Hand Bell Choir
      - Church Mission Teams
      - Committees
    - Existing expectations and hopes for family consistency at worship services
  - Seek a statement of commitment from wider church leadership regarding a "season of support" (potentially a year) for greater intergenerational awareness, commitment, and equipping to help inspire an intentional family faith mindset.
    - Monthly meeting of program staff for focus on family faith and intergenerational issues
    - Monthly conversations among church committees to discuss greater ministry opportunities with family faith and intergenerational issues
    - Standing monthly report of progress and ideas at the Board of Directors
- 2) Create a "Family Faith Exploration Team" as a one year experiment
  - Build the team with members from Church Staff, Christian Education, Youth Committee, SAM Club (Senior Adult Ministry) and ask for both parents and students to serve on the team. This team will be resourced with key articles and documents that give an overview of different perspectives on family faith. They will give a monthly update to the Board of Directors.
  - Host an initial retreat for team building, goal setting, and begin accomplishing the primary task of creating church wide initiatives to respond to the following question:



- Where can we as a wider church invest and focus differently to create a different mindset that inspires family faith and intergenerational connections?
  - Consider ways that we can strategically challenge families to consistent attendance and participation for Sunday morning worship services
  - Respond to these initial proposals:
    - Research and suggest a significant training event or conference with key ministry leaders and staff to both grow in their understanding of family faith resources and then communicate to the wider church about these resources.
    - Help to create a new climate of collaboration and partnership between Children's Ministry and Youth Ministry and bring specific recommendations to the Board of Directors at the end of their one year commitment.
    - Consider reflecting on "faith milestones" as a model for encouraging family faith in the midst of the wider church body.
    - Discuss the opportunities for more consistent family attendance and participation for Sunday morning worship services.
- 3) In our present ministries and among our staff, always ask one more key question:
- Where do opportunities for greater connections between the generations (and our families) within this present event/activity exist? In order to shift church culture to a greater awareness about the power of intergenerational connections, we must believe in the vision of greater connections and seek to foster such opportunities. This does not mean that many more events need to be planned, but rather existing events and activities need to be evaluated and adjusted to maximize the potential for connection.
- 4) Adjustments to Existing Grad Prep Program
- Create avenues (and specific leadership follow up) for better accountability partner support to challenge them to connect once a month.
  - Utilize the feedback from the "Ready or Not" survey in the curriculum to create more tools for students to consider more practice and processing of "faith concerns."
  - Create a better format for unveiling and engaging with the "College Church Connection" reports with our seniors. Perhaps set up "CCC nights" that would get the senior around the table with parents, their small group leader, prayer partner, and accountability partner and chat about Christian community goals for the first month that they land in college. All the adults would commit to prayerfully follow up.
  - Build a full team for better support of the Grad Prep Program
    - Additional roles could include curriculum support, parent resourcing, food and hospitality support, and accountability follow-up.

## **Research Report – “Plugged In” Youth Ministry Survey**

Based on EYM – Exemplary Youth Ministry Project

The Goal of the Study: *To measure the health of the congregational environment (“spirit and culture”) of Longview Community Church as a whole as it relates to nurturing and encouraging the faith of individual students who grow up in their midst, as well as the level of commitment and support for our emerging model of sustainable youth ministry.*

There are two sections to this survey:

- SECTION 1: Seeks to discover the general sense of the vitality of youth ministry (with some comparison of previous surveys taken), as well as measure how faithfully we have communicated the vision of “Plugged In” Youth Ministry to the wider church. Also, general feedback was received and listed in categories.
- SECTION 2: Seeks to evaluate the Faith Assets present at Longview Community Church. Using a tool based on the work of the Exemplary Youth Ministry Project (EYM), we can assess and discuss our congregation’s impact on young people. By analyzing both our stated *priority* of these faith assets and how people view our effectiveness in actual *practice*, we will be able to affirm our strengths and see areas for growth and improvement. These 44 faith assets are reflected in four different spheres:
  - Congregational Faith and Qualities, Youth Ministry Qualities, Family Faith Qualities, Leadership Qualities (Lead Pastor, Youth Pastor, Youth/Adult Leaders)

### **General Information about the Study**

- Survey was taken by 112 people over several weeks in February/March 2015, Appr. 20% students, Appr. 80% adults, 41% Youth Ministry parents, 39% described themselves as “very involved” – This survey utilized Survey Monkey to receive the responses.

### **Overall Summary of Findings:**

#### **Areas for Great Affirmation**

- Congregational support, excitement, and amazing potential for youth ministry to thrive
- People affirm the support of strong leaders (staff/volunteer) and a strong vision in YM
- People appear excited about greater intergenerational connections to be mutually blessed
- LVCC has an overall very healthy environment to plant a sustainable model of youth ministry that helps our students keep their faith for the long haul.

#### **Areas for Improvement**

- Opportunities are needed for greater connections between the generations, especially in the support of Family Faith. More collaboration between Children’s Ministry and Youth Ministry is essential to this task. This would include greater participation and involvement of youth in the life of the wider

- church, especially encouraging families and students to participate (and attend!) more consistently on Sunday morning worship times.
- Some Congregational Assets could use attention, especially in places where there is a large “gap” between what is perceived as priority and what is experienced in practice.

Final Assessment:

*Longview Community Church is in a very positive place of “Spirit and Culture” to nurture and encourage enduring faith for our youth. We have so much to be grateful for. However, focus is needed on family faith arena and evaluating the potential of ministry collaboration is critical.*

**Specific Details: SECTION 1**

Areas for Great Affirmation

- Over the past four years, there is much greater confidence in the health and vitality of Youth Ministry at LVCC.
- Overall, a majority of people have seen Youth Ministry growing in its visibility in the congregation and going a good job of communicating its vision and mission.
- People see greater involvement among students, strong leadership (paid and volunteer), a welcome and safe atmosphere to help students “own” their faith, and more focus on intergenerational efforts.

Areas for Improvement

- From a relational perspective within the youth ministry, there is still hope for greater connections among the youth without cliques developing. This also means being more intentional about attracting new families/students and helping them get connected.
- From a programmatic perspective within the youth ministry, there is concern about busyness and event overload. Also, there is hope to continue to improve our youth room.
- From a congregational perspective, there is a desire for more intergenerational connections, to include seeing more youth and families consistently participating in Sunday morning worship. In addition to this, there is hope for more connection and interaction with children’s ministry.

Key Questions posed:

*If the GOAL is to build a great youth ministry, how CLOSE is Longview Community Church to reaching that goal? (Comparing 3 different SEASONS of YOUTH MINISTRY)*

August 2011, prior to new youth pastor 78 people took survey (90% = warm/kinda cool/ice cold)

February 2012, same survey was repeated with 62 people (90% = warm, hot)

February/March 2015, one key question was asked again with 112 people (90% = hot/on fire)

*How familiar are you with our Youth Ministry's Vision Statement: "Connecting as a family that focuses on Jesus." Only 5% were NOT familiar with this statement at all.*

*We are very committed to building a relational network of supportive adults and peers for each of our students (called a constellation). From your angle, how do you think we are doing?*

*Almost 90% reported doing Great (36%) or Well (51%)*

*What is ONE thing that is RIGHT about our youth ministry? KEY WORDS: Involvement, Leadership, Welcome/Safe Atmosphere, Pastor(s), Youth owning faith, Intergenerational*

*What is ONE thing that you would change about our youth ministry? KEY WORDS: Nothing/wouldn't change anything, More connections/less cliques, Busyness/too many events, Improve youth room/facility, More youth in regular worship, More intergeneration connections and/or better connection with children's ministry*

*Other thoughts/feedback: KEY WORDS: Attracting and keeping youth & families, numeric growth thoughts, Better faith development/ Curriculum Thoughts, Connection/Cliques Thoughts, Youth Program Thoughts, Church Program Thoughts, Leadership Thoughts, Students "keeping their faith for the long haul" Thoughts, General Affirmations, Meeting Needs of the Youth*

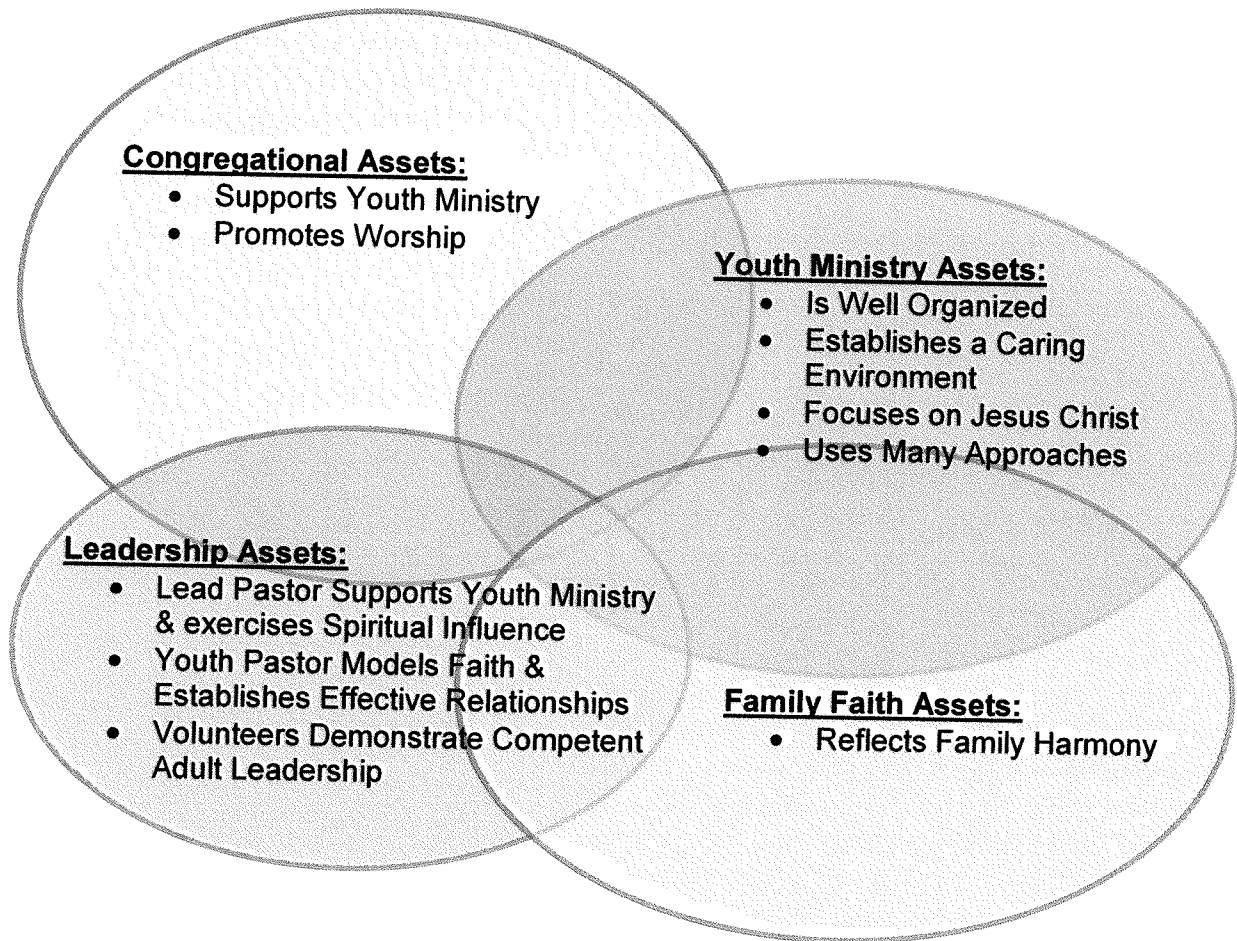
## **SECTION 2:**

### **Part I: Celebrating Strengths!**

#### **Areas for Great Affirmation**

- Overall high scores for our church
- Amazing strength from Lead Pastor support
- Good strength from Youth Pastor support
- Overall excitement about youth involvement in the church
- Good sense of health in Youth Ministry program structures and relational support

#### **STRONGEST Practices at Longview Community Church**

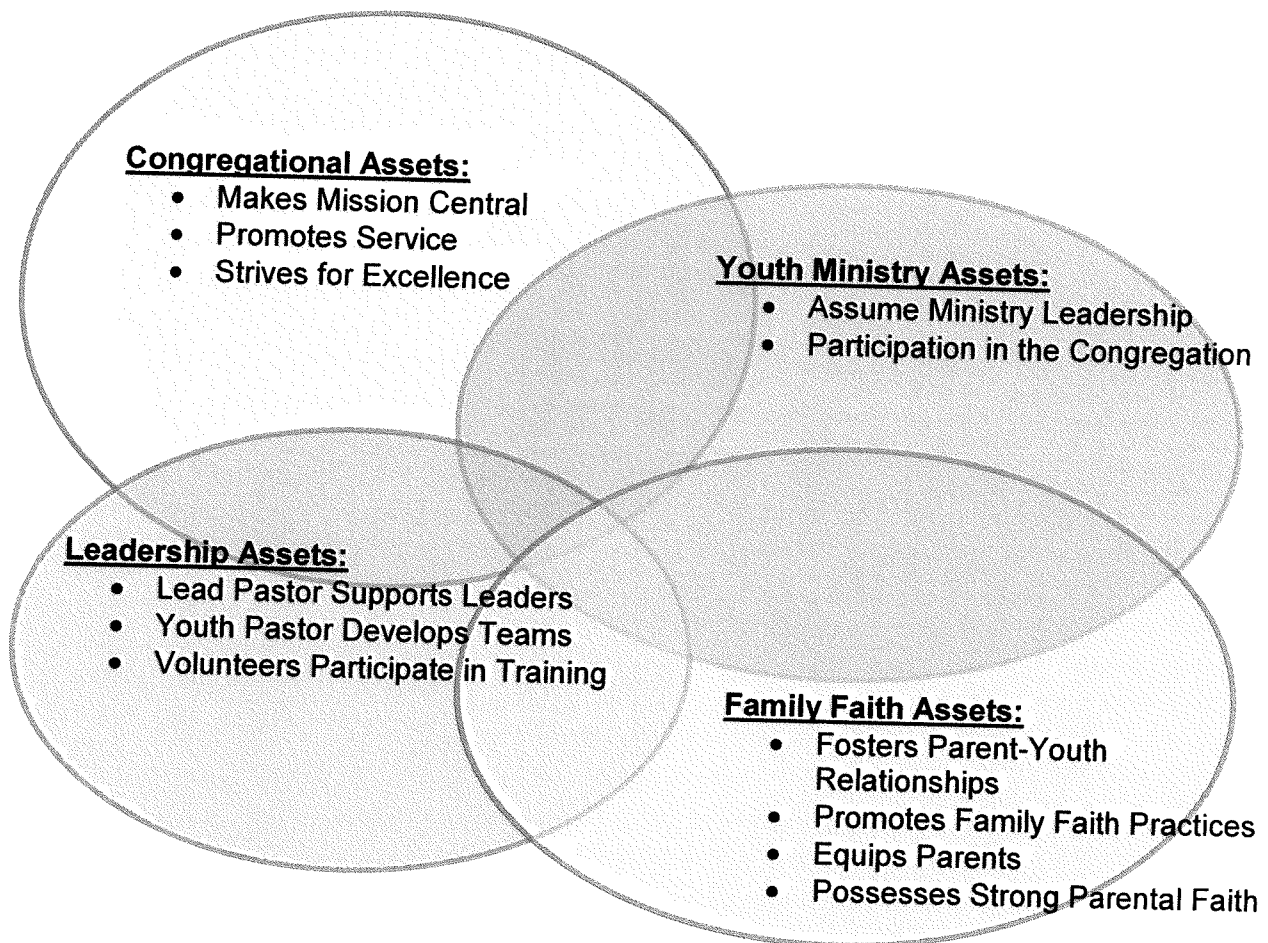


## **Part II: Addressing “blindspots” and/or “gaps” in the data**

### **Areas for Improvement**

- Primarily, conversations and focused effort needed in Family Faith Arena in several different areas.
- Within Youth Ministry sphere, greater participation and involvement in the wider church would be a key area to invest more time and energy
- Some Congregational Assets could use attention, especially in places where there is a large “gap” between what is perceived as priority and what is experienced in practice.
- Within the Leadership sphere, these scores are still relatively high.

### **LOWEST Practices at Longview Community Church**



## ACTUAL PRACTICE at LVCC

"Plugged In" Survey PRACTICE	Faith Assets Assessment - Feb/Mar. 2015		
ASSETS	SPHERE	ACTUAL PRACTICE	
Supports Youth Ministry	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7	TOP TEN PRACTICES
Exercises Spiritual Influence	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7	
Models Faith	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7	
Establishes Effective Relationships	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7	
Demonstrates Interpersonal Competence	Leadership (Pastor)	4.6	
Provides Competent Leadership	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.6	
Mentors Faith Life	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.6	
Knows Youth	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.6	
Is Well Organized and Planned	Youth Ministry	4.5	
Supports Leaders	Leadership (Pastor)	4.5	
Develops Teams	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.5	TOP OF EACH SPHERE
Establishes a Caring Environment	Youth Ministry	4.4	
Focuses on Jesus Christ	Youth Ministry	4.4	
Uses Many Approaches	Youth Ministry	4.4	
Supports Youth Ministry	Congregational	4.3	
Develops Quality Relationships	Youth Ministry	4.3	
Considers Life Issues	Youth Ministry	4.3	
Demonstrate Competent Adult Leadership	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.2	
Promotes Worship	Congregational	4.1	
Are Equipped for Peer Ministry	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.1	
Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.1	LOWEST TEN PRACTICES
Possess Vibrant Faith	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.1	
Participate in Training	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.1	
Emphasizes Prayer	Congregational	4	
Focus on Discipleship	Congregational	4	
Demonstrates Hospitality	Congregational	4	
Participate in the Congregation	Youth Ministry	4	
Assume Ministry Leadership	Youth Ministry	4	
Experiences God's living presence	Congregational	3.9	
Emphasizes Scripture	Congregational	3.9	
Encourages Thinking	Congregational	3.9	LOWEST OF EACH SPHERE
Creates Community	Congregational	3.9	
Encourages Small Groups	Congregational	3.9	
Demonstrates Effective Practices	Congregational	3.9	
Makes Faith Central	Congregational	3.8	
Fosters Ethical Responsibility	Congregational	3.8	
Reflects Family Harmony	Family	3.8	
Strives for Excellence	Congregational	3.7	
Promotes Service	Congregational	3.7	
Makes Mission Central	Congregational	3.7	
Possesses Strong Parental Faith	Family	3.7	Leadership (Youth Pastor)
Promotes Family Faith Practices	Family	3.5	
Equips Parents	Family	3.5	
Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships	Family	3.4	

### **Priority and Practice at Longview Community Church**

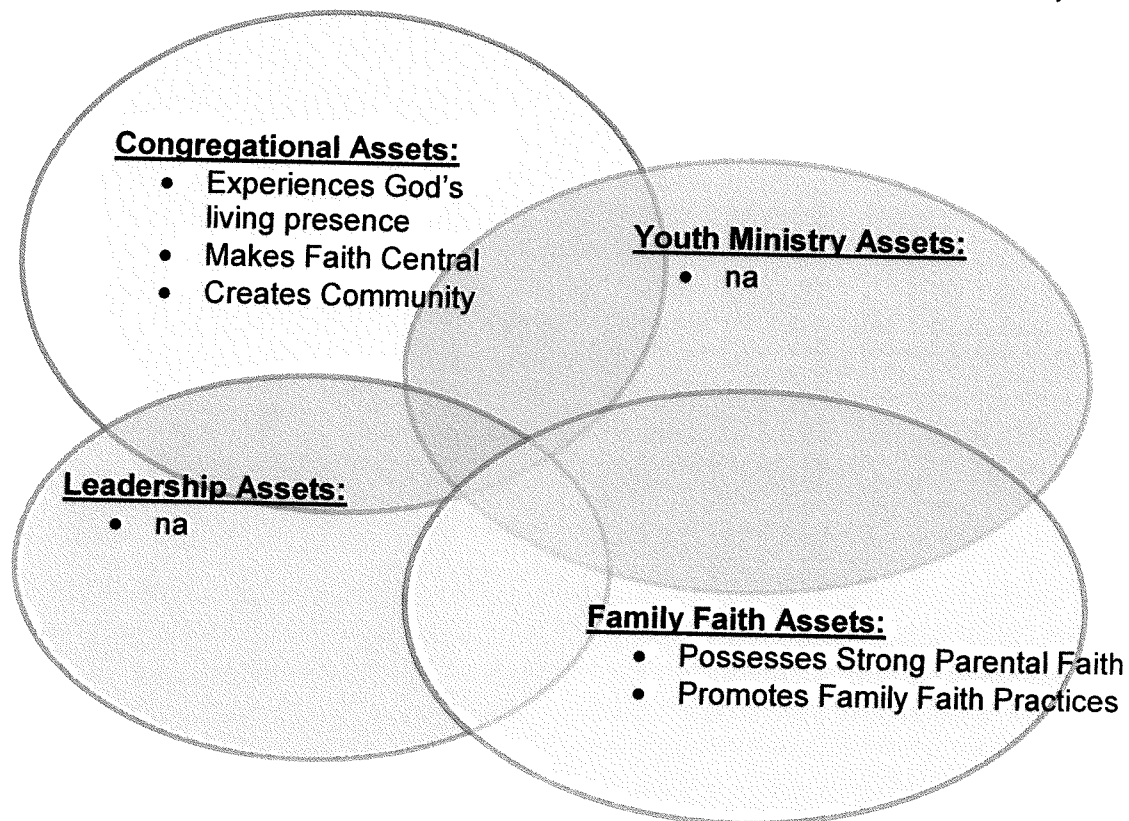
*While inferential statistics were not applied to this data, visual comparisons between practice and priority provide this assessment.*

#### **Areas for Great Affirmation**

*There is great continuity between the ordering of Priority and Practice. Nine out of the top ten priorities are also in the top ten for practices (with the remaining being #11). Nine out of the lowest priorities are in the lowest ten for practices (with the remaining being #16 from bottom).*

#### **Areas for Improvement**

*Areas of Largest "Gaps" between Priority and Practice at Longview Community Church*



#### **Areas of Largest "Gaps"**

SPHERE	ASSET	GAP	PRIORITY	PRACTICE	Difference
Congregational	Experiences God's living presence	0.5	17th	29th	12
Congregational	Makes Faith Central	0.5	28th	35th	7
Congregational	Creates Community	0.5	20th	33rd	13
Congregational	Makes Mission Central	0.4	34th	40th	6
Congregational	Emphasizes Scripture	0.4	19th	31st	12
Congregational	Focus on Discipleship	0.4	18th	26th	8
Family	Possesses Strong Parental Faith	0.4	38th	40th	2
Family	Promotes Family Faith Practices	0.3	41st	41st	0



## PRIORITY – stated value at LVCC

"Plugged In" Survey	Faith Assets Assessment			
PRIORITY	- Feb/Mar. 2015			
ASSET	SPHERE	PRIORITY		
Models Faith	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.8		
Provides Competent Leadership	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.8		TOP TEN PRIORITIES
Develops Teams	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.8		
Is Well Organized and Planned	Youth Ministry	4.7		TOP OF EACH SPHERE
Supports Youth Ministry	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7		Leadership (Youth Pastor)
Exercises Spiritual Influence	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7		Youth Ministry
Demonstrates Interpersonal Competence	Leadership (Pastor)	4.7		Leadership (Pastor)
Mentors Faith Life	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7		Congregational
Establishes Effective Relationships	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7		Leadership (Adult/Youth Ldrs)
Knows Youth	Leadership (Youth Pastor)	4.7		Family
Establishes a Caring Environment	Youth Ministry	4.6		
Develops Quality Relationships	Youth Ministry	4.6		
Focuses on Jesus Christ	Youth Ministry	4.6		
Supports Leaders	Leadership (Pastor)	4.6		
Considers Life Issues	Youth Ministry	4.5		
Uses Many Approaches	Youth Ministry	4.5		
Supports Youth Ministry	Congregational	4.4		
Experiences God's living presence	Congregational	4.4		
Focus on Discipleship	Congregational	4.4		
Emphasizes Scripture	Congregational	4.4		
Creates Community	Congregational	4.4		
Are Equipped for Peer Ministry	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.4		
Establish Adult-Youth Mentoring	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.4		
Participate in Training	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.4		
Demonstrate Competent Adult Leadership	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.4		
Possess Vibrant Faith	Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)	4.4		
Emphasizes Prayer	Congregational	4.3		
Demonstrates Hospitality	Congregational	4.3		
Makes Faith Central	Congregational	4.2		
Encourages Thinking	Congregational	4.2		
Encourages Small Groups	Congregational	4.2		
Promotes Worship	Congregational	4.2		
Participate in the Congregation	Youth Ministry	4.2		
Assume Ministry Leadership	Youth Ministry	4.2		
Makes Mission Central	Congregational	4.1		LOWEST TEN PRIORITIES
Fosters Ethical Responsibility	Congregational	4.1		
Demonstrates Effective Practices	Congregational	4.1		
Reflects Family Harmony	Family	4.1		LOWEST OF EACH SPHERE
Possesses Strong Parental Faith	Family	4.1		Leadership (Youth Pastor)
Strives for Excellence	Congregational	4		Youth Ministry
Promotes Service	Congregational	4		Leadership (Pastor)
Promotes Family Faith Practices	Family	3.9		Congregational
Equips Parents	Family	3.7		Leadership (Adult/Youth Leaders)
Fosters Parent-Youth Relationships	Family	3.7		Family

## Research Report Summary – “Ready or Not” Survey

The Goal of the Study: *To measure the difference that a “college/grad prep” program makes with our graduates. By comparing the two test groups (“prepped”=GP students and “non-prepped”=NP students), the conclusions of this study can be used to improve the grad prep process in our setting.*

The two primary targets of this study are summed up in the following questions:

- What difference does being part of a “college/grad prep” program make in helping students stay strong in their faith after graduation?
  - Trying to measure the “strength of faith” by using ten “faith concern” questions.
- What difference does being part of a “college/grad prep” program make in helping students know what to expect related to their faith after graduation
  - Trying to measure the “level of expectation” by asking how their initial months after graduation related to their expectations.

### General Information about the Study

- Survey was taken by graduates of Class of 2014 who were active in youth ministry as high school seniors, Survey was taken 6 months after graduation (Dec. 2014), 2/3rds of this group of 45 participants participated in some sort of grad/college “prep” program.
- This survey utilized Survey Monkey to receive the responses.

### Evaluating the scores.....

On a scale of 1 (low) – 4 (high), the “score” represents the perceived “strength of faith.” (+3.25) – Encouraging, (3 – 3.25) – Positive, (2.5 – 3) – Fair, (Below 2.5) – Needs Focus  
*The “gap” is the difference between the test groups (grad prep/non-grad prep)*

### Overall Summary of Findings

#1 – Very Positive and Encouraging News about Grads with Strong Faith! Strong Faith exhibited in answers – *Score of 3+ (out of a 1 to 4 scale) would be considered at least positive (Half of answers average over 3+) Overall Average of students is 3 Six students scored 3.5+ These students were “ACTIVE” in youth group as seniors and this looks like a very good thing!*

#2 – Very Little Difference seen in answers considering the “strength of their faith”

*Widest gap in score was .33 – GP and NP split the scores*

#3 – Major Difference seen in how much college experiences are “like what they expected.”

#4 – Two questions were faulty in design (and must be disregarded).

*Do not really measure “strong faith” or “weak faith” – just honest faith*

**Final Assessment:** *Grad Prep programs do make a difference in helping students know what to expect related to their faith after graduation.*

**Responses to the Question:** “Think about what you expected a YEAR AGO in regards to these challenges. Which statement best represents your experience?”

**Expectations are affected by GRAD PREP**

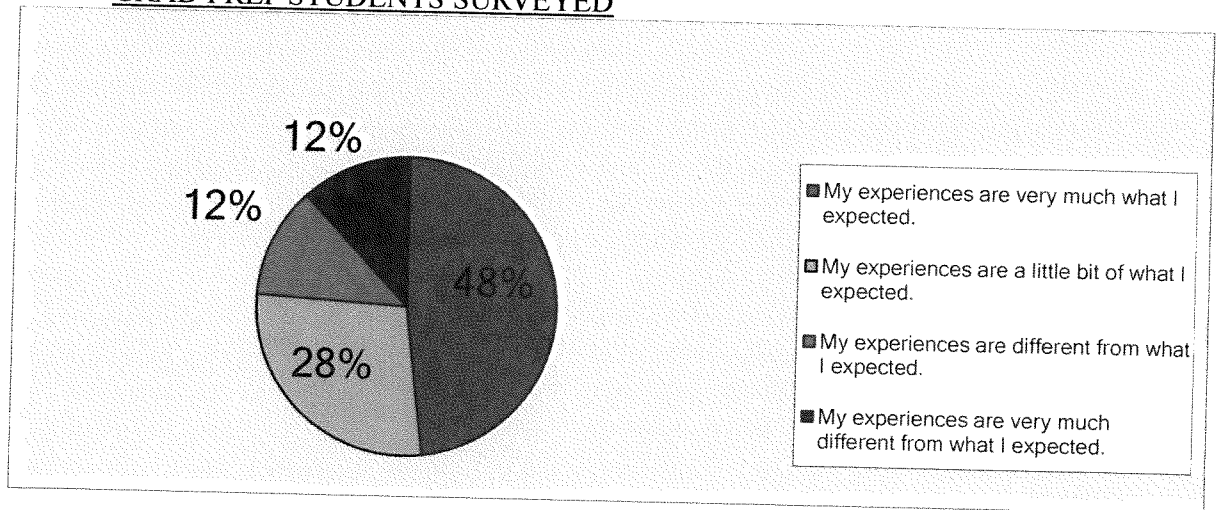
*Compare Grad Prep with non-Grad Prep*

Very Much Expected - 48% to 19%

What I Expected – 76% to 50%

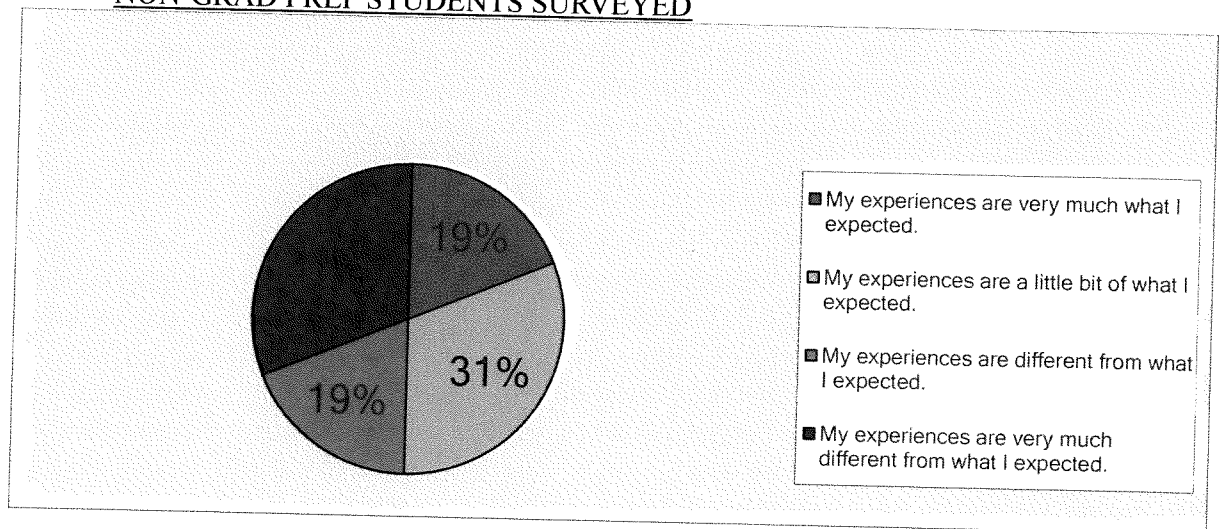
Very Much Different – 12% to 31%

**GRAD PREP STUDENTS SURVEYED**



**Responses to the Question:** “Think about what you expected a YEAR AGO in regards to these challenges. Which statement best represents your experience?”

**NON-GRAD PREP STUDENTS SURVEYED**



## **PLUGGED IN YOUTH MINISTRY SURVEY – SECTION 1:**

Charts/Details

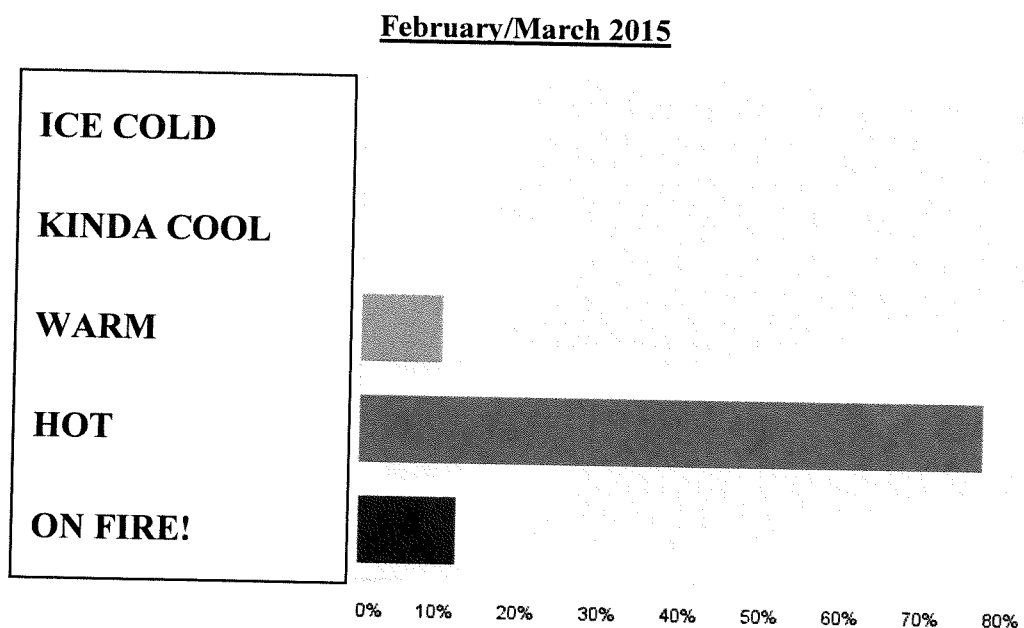
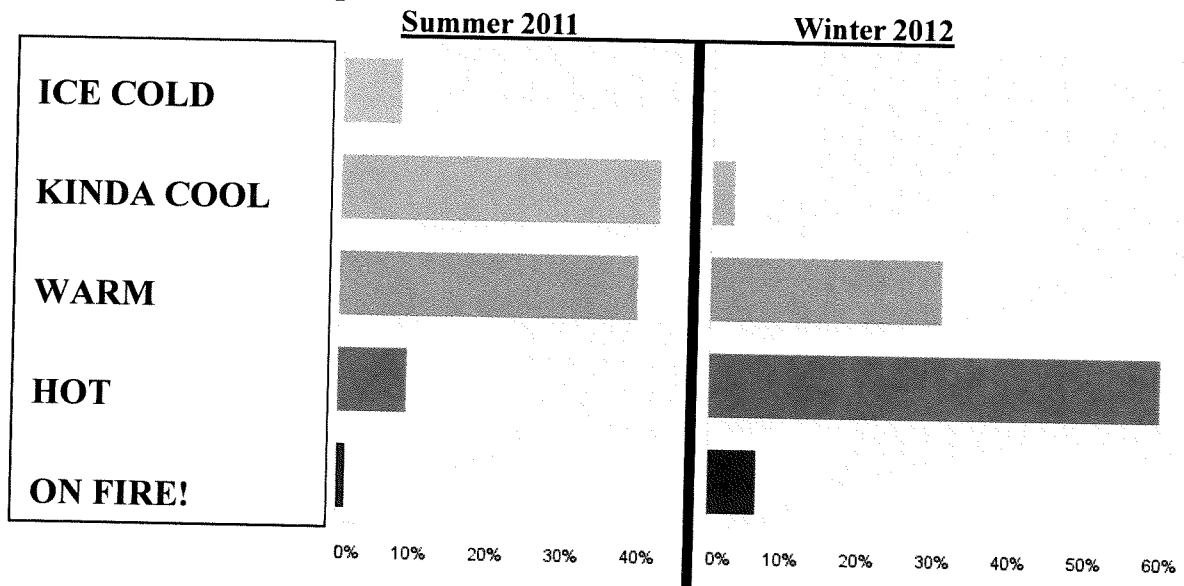
*Comparing 3 different SEASONS of YOUTH MINISTRY*

August 2011 (prior to new youth pastor) 78 people took survey (90% warm/kinda cool/ice cold) – (17 students, 20 Youth Ministry parents, 61 adults)

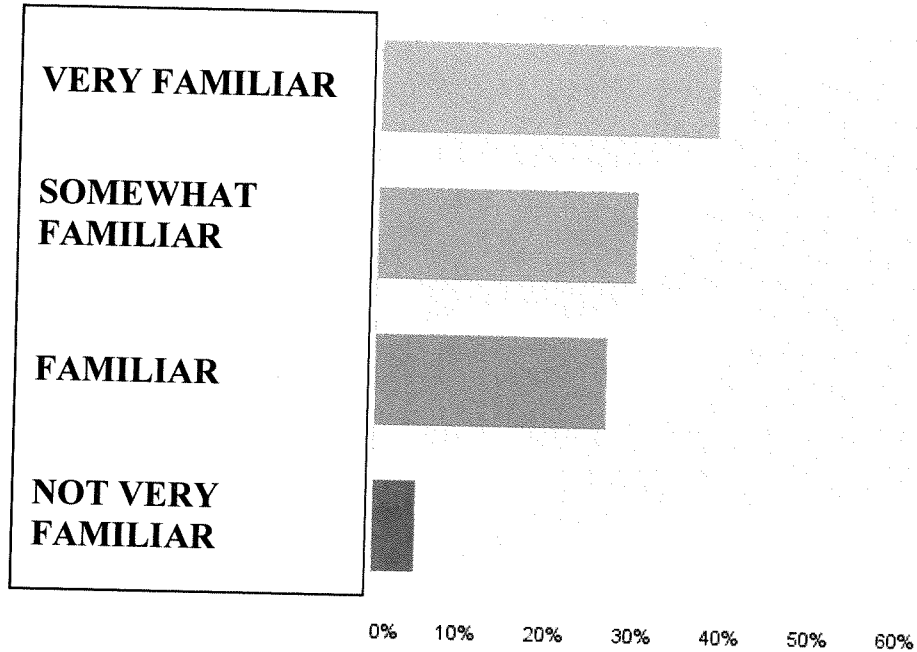
February 2012, same survey was repeated with 62 people – (19 students, 18 Youth Ministry parents, 43 adults)

February/March 2015, one key question was asked again with 112 people (90% hot/on fire) – (20 students, 40 Youth Ministry parents, 92 adults)

*If the GOAL is to build a great youth ministry, how CLOSE is Longview Community Church to reaching that goal?*

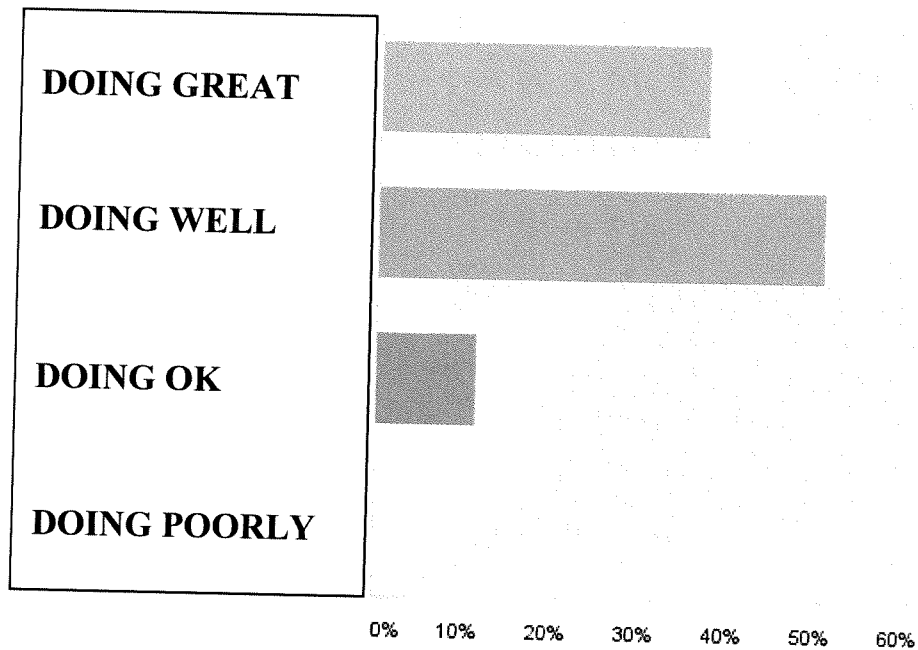


*How familiar are you with our Youth Ministry's Vision Statement: "Connecting as a family that focuses on Jesus."*



*We are very committed to building a relational network of supportive adults and peers for each of our students (called a constellation).*

*From your angle, how do you think we are doing?*



### **Additional Feedback from SECTION 1:**

What is ONE thing that is RIGHT about our youth ministry? Answered: 96

*NOTE: I have included all feedback as was written, including spelling errors. I have categorized and then combined some similar answers, but have made no other adjustments.*

#### **KEY WORDS & #s:**

*Involvement: 20x*

*Leadership: 13x*

*Welcome/Safe: 9x ("welcomeness")*

*Pastor(s): 8x*

*Owning faith: 4x*

*Intergenerational: 4x*

#### **Wider Church Spirit and Culture:**

Strong congregational commitment

The pastors

youth are active part of the church and valued.

Focus on the Kids

congregational support

Visibility

Our youth are very visible with our church congregation.

Excellent communication throughout each component of the ministry

Whole church involvement

#### **Events/Program Structure:**

Gather and Deeper events

small group / small groups and student involvement / Small groups

Love the variety of types of interactions.

The way you are equipping students to become leaders

We have a variety of activities to participate in from serve events, worship/deeper events, friendship events and gather/small group nights to encourage the students' growth in their relationship with God. As well as getting the students involved in the leadership and owning their youth group and owning their faith.

Multi-dimensional

Encourage parents to be involved & you provide opportunities to help them raise their children.

There are many opportunities for our youth to get involved on whatever level they are comfortable.

Peer to Peer Ministry

special events

Outreach to the community

The way Chris links and focuses on the Bible directly for all that we do, and has the kids come up with the plans based on that.

### Leadership:

ability to adapt change receive constructive criticism

It's organized

consistency. students know what is expected from them

the amazing adults that really take their time to be there for each student

Having God loving, Christian youth workers as an example for our kids to look up to for an example of how they can live their life.

Great adult leaders

Many adult and student leaders

Our Youth Pastor's ability to get parents and other adults involved

An amazing, fun youth pastor whom the students can relate to.

Students are encouraged to take leadership roles instead of letting the adults do most of the leading

Lots of involved adults

Our energetic youth pastor

The hearts of the adults involved are GOLD!

Youth pastor connects with kids !

Our youth pastor

leadership

Pastor Chris gets the kids involved in all facets of the church...leading worship, greeting in first service, setting up after church coffee hours and that's just a small example that I see. Pastor Chris has many activities and volunteering opportunities for the youth to help them grow in their spiritual walk, in my opinion.

Committed leader with constancy of purpose

Enthusiastic leaders, fun activities

Great leadership opportunities for youth and adult

Excited leadership, from both the parents and youth.

Consistent adult leaders who are volunteering back to back years.

### Atmosphere:

making new people feel welcomed / We are very welcoming / we are very welcoming /

Most people are feeling really welcome / Welcomeness

It isn't just a Sunday ministry. It is truly a "family". When a younger member of the church is struggling with anything, the first person they want to call for support is someone from within the church family. That allows whatever the issue may be to be addressed with someone supportive and also from a faith-based standpoint. You cannot get any more "right" than that.

Involvement / One thing that is right about our youth ministry is how involved we are with the youth. I believe that with prayer partners and other connections, people feel more comfortable. / There is a lot for students to be involved in. / Its very involved / involvement / Great Involvement of kids / Involving all ages / Student involvement.

The attitude fun, care and fellowship, caring

Kids are connected and have lots of opportunities for those connections.

The kids not only have opportunities to connect with each other and adults but to grow in their relationship with Christ  
connection to others

Kids feel safe to be themselves / Everyone feels safe and comfortable / Providing a safe, inviting place to be. / It's SAFE! / Very inclusive to all students.  
It is fun and engaging.

Intergenerational connections:

we are trying to connect the older adults 1st and 2nd service as prayer partners  
While congregation involvement, intergenerationally.

It is Multi-Generational!

intergenerational

All generations are involved.

We involve the body of the church with the youth group  
prayer partners

Faith:

The joy for Jesus the children have

Enthusiasm for Christ

Enthusiasm and participation

It is amazing how you can see the growth and the passion for Christ.

Biblically linked in a caring manner

Excitement amongst participants

Jesus is the center!

Focus on unity with Christ and fellowship with believers

connection with peers adults and god

God

Emphasis on relationship with Jesus

Growth

you make LOVING Jesus fun

Ownership:

The youth KNOW that it is THEIR ministry and there's a lot of ownership.

We focus on making it a youth ministry by the youth, for the youth.

Teaching the youth to own their faith and challenging them where they are at.

Overall:

Everything

Amazing

Great support and intentions



What is ONE thing that you would change about our youth ministry? Answered: 82  
NOTE: *I have included all feedback as was written, including spelling errors. I have categorized and then combined some similar answers, but have made no other adjustments.*

KEY WORDS & #s:

*Nothing/ n/a /can't think of anything / wouldn't change anything: 10x*  
*More connections/less cliques: 10x*  
*Busyness/too many events: 3x*  
*Improve youth room/facility: 6x*  
*More youth in regular worship: 5x*  
*More intergeneration connections and/or better connection with children's ministry: 5x*

Nothing/can't think of anything, etc.

can't think of anything , Can't think of anything , Nothing , I cannot think of anything,  
None, nothing I can think of, Nothing/ n/a /can't think of anything / wouldn't change  
anything / keep doing what you're doing / not sure, not sure.

Attracting families/numeric growth and connection

Attracting more new members of youth group from outside church  
I don't know how one would even go about it, but it would be great if we could great if  
we could connect with the parents of the kids who don't go to church at all.  
More Kids from Mt Solo  
Not enough committed high schoolers  
Bringing in more unchurched kids  
Get more kids into it

Better faith development/ Curriculum Changes

needs to be more bible study and knowledge happening  
Having the students actually use their Bibles more.  
have specific subjects that teens face. (dating, homosexuality,)  
I would encourage the youth to help decide what topics should be covered in youth  
group.

Health/Balance Issues:

Busyness  
There is a lot packed into the summer and it gets really expensive.  
Sometimes there are too many events in one month. Also encourage small group leaders  
and prayer partners, that are not already reaching out to their youth, to do so. Don't wait  
for a crisis to build a relationship with the youth, the "good kids" still need that  
connection.  
Sometimes success is tough, the size of the group is daunting to shy kids  
more scholarships for underprivileged students.  
We could be more intentional about demeaning jokes or language that could be translated  
by a student as reprenting them personally.

### Lack of Connection/Cliques

Noticing that people are feeling left out because they aren't in the clique  
More time for people to become better friends  
Get rid of the clique that is currently prevelant  
More connections in the constellation  
Making connections with college students/checking in on them  
More inclusion--intentionally setting up opportunities for all students to get to know each other more  
kind of clique  
More connection among the new and old high schoolers.  
Finding a way to retain more students  
I am a bit intimidated -- not sure exactly how to plug in. Would like someone to walk me throught the details. Just going downstairs to the youth room without knowing what to expect can be overwhelming.

### Youth Program Changes

One thing I would change about our youth ministry is having more combined high school middle school activities. / More opportunities for middle school and high school to meet together  
i would like us to have more worship  
youth room / Youth space out of the basement. / Investment in facilities / Update the youth facilities / Location, I don't like sending youth to the Basement, like a dungeon. / Better facility  
High school group could use something to do on Wed night.  
Outreach to unchurched youth  
More involvement in local mission efforts  
If anything I would change small groups. You know, switch the leaders every week so you can get to know all of them. Not just one.  
More friendship events so people can bring more friends  
Develop a mentoring program of l=older youth and younger youth. ( a bit like accountability partners used in grad prep) to improve connection and applying biblical learnings in everyday life  
Less focus on music  
small groups could be deeper  
Community involvement.  
more worship  
Not to let kids choose their own partners

### Church Program Changes

More youth families connected into other church opportunities  
I'd like to see more students come to Sunday morning worship.  
Do multi generational activities  
Bridging the upper elementary kids to the middle school  
envolvment in worship as regular attenders  
I would like to see more connection between our youth at youth group and the youth that shows up on Sunday mornings. Some of our youth committed to Youth Group are from

other churches. It would be great if there was more outreach to the unchurched and seeing those students committed to Sunday worship and/or Sunday School.  
Additional focus on family involvement and ensure students are respectful of parents  
More connection with children's ministry  
More events with older generations  
It would be cool to see the youth do the whole service several times a year, even the message with short things from several students  
More universal support from the whole congregation.  
Lots of youth show up during a worship service if they are participating personally on stage. Other Sundays there are only a few who sit with their families. I haven't seen that corporate worship is a priority for them on an individual basis.  
Total church more involved  
students regularly worshipping

#### Leadership Changes

More adults involved  
more diverse adult volunteers that don't have kids in program  
The cliques among adult helpers, mostly parents of students.  
not silo  
There has been confusion about who has input in decision making and miscommunication that does not originate from any one source.  
More involvement from youth  
More communication about how adults can be involved  
more participation from involved adults to create healthy space for church staff members

Please feel free to include any other thoughts/feedback that might be helpful to hear your heart and sense your dreams about our youth ministry. Thanks a ton! You are truly part of the "building up" of a stronger youth ministry in our church. Answered: 44

NOTE: *I have included all feedback as was written, including spelling errors. I have categorized and then combined some similar answers, but have made no other adjustments.*

#### Attracting and keeping youth & families, numeric growth thoughts:

Doing a great job at Longview CC. I wonder how we can better hook kids once we get them in the door for events, so they stay. Tough question and not new, but important I think.

I would like to see you taking time to visit with the parents of all the youth, and getting to know them, whether they go to our church or no church at all.

How can we reach more kids in the community that need help. Seems like our only outreach is friends asking friends.

#### Better faith development/ Curriculum Thoughts:

One thing that I think we could focus on more is having group discussions about our faith.

#### Connection/Cliques Thoughts:

I would like to see that every student is accepted the same and to see that everyone wants to be there.

Just to continue to encourage the more outgoing youth leaders to pull in the more shy kids that have a harder time being assertive. I have one very shy teen who comes home feeling alone and left behind by his "friends" at times.

My prayer would be for our ministry to continue to provide a safe place for all kids of the community to connect and to have a sense of family. Our focus on encouraging youth in their faith through worship, small groups and serving opportunities strengthens kids' spiritual muscles for the time when they move on. This is only done by all church family participation, not by 1 or 2 people.

#### Youth Program Thoughts:

Getting started on building "niches" for those with other interests besides music, ie computers (make powerpoints for lessons), art (displayed throughout church), acting (church plays, youth group skits), etc.

More worship and Jokes from Chris

I believe the youth group has good intent. Some of the activities like hot chocolate handouts give students a false sense of what it takes to be charitable. My daughter now wants to help people as a career which is admirable. However, I don't believe she understands the real needs and the homeless and the criminal activities that they often encounter.

the pool table is the center of attention and I feel left out because I don't like playing there I seem to be missing the connection times when I am supposed to come meet with my prayer partner. I get the newsletters, but the part where I come in may be buried down the list of all the activities the kids are doing. Also, Chris should preach more often in the main service. He uses visuals and he bases it on exact Bible verses in a way that makes God very real. I also appreciate how food is often included in many meetings.

#### Church Program Thoughts:

Would love to see more testimonies to have more opportunities to see God at work in these kids .

I seldom see youth in the regular worship , where is their commitment?

Find ways that older adults can participate in youth ministry. We have lots of great ideas of how we can help each other in the ministry and in relationship to each other! We just don't have the energy for a lot of the current youth activities.

#### Leadership Thoughts:

I think our upper classmen need to step it up and be more including to everyone like last years seniors and stop just dwelling in the past cause each year is going to be different. I'm sure snow camp helped, but I think the old group might be reluctant to connect with the new group and step up as leaders. Retreats or a leadership opportunity for the upperclassmen could help pull te group together again.

We need more staff at the highschool level. To reach the next level, I think we need more than just 1 1/2 staff and adult volunteers.

It would be great to see non-parent leaders take more responsibility in our Youth Ministry a.k.a.. Youth Group/Voltage and Wired. Not sure what it would take to draw them in but I think students may have an easier time connecting to those who are uninvolved with the students on a family level.

There are a ton of older people in the congregation that could give of their vast knowledge. We are a congregation with a huge mixture of professions and skills.

Students keeping their faith for the long haul Thoughts:

capturing junior and senior awareness of persistent attendance in some form of a variety of church functions as well as youth only functions still a priority. I have concern for their skepticism of depth of care and busy-ness of outside activities. Get parents onboard with prioritizing their child's spiritual life. Address the parent/family spiritual life and continuity to get deeper with teens. Role models count. Still frustrated with driveby/dropoff parents. I see much better connectivity with Chris sharing info-books, videos etc.

If our goal is to see students continue on in the faith after they leave high school, they need to be coming to worship with the adults. Most Sundays, I don't see very many (unless they are part of the service – like when they are reporting on their camp experience). I know many youth who were "on fire" when they were involved in the many fun, crazy and inspirational youth events, but after graduation, the excitement isn't there and they often drop out of church.

I can only speak for my child's involvement in youth ministries, and I cannot think of anything that I would change or add too. Moving into adulthood, my child still feels that connection completely. I know that wherever life takes my child, those relationships he has built within the church, from young to senior adults, will last forever. Because of that, I never doubt that he will live his life trying to emulate what he has been shown through the youth ministry at Longview Community Church.

My experience as a person who has been involved in leading youth at Longview Community Church in the 60s and 70s is that a personal commitment to Jesus and discipleship of that faith is what has naturally caused those involved to continue their commitment to their faith long after high school. A remarkable number of them have become the church leaders of today. Challenges by youth leaders to help youth understand their faith and believe that God is Who He says He is through in-depth Bible study makes all the difference. If they don't LOVE God's word today, kids have no foundation for their faith in the future. Doing good deeds are an important response to living like Jesus, but good works can be done by non-Christians. Our students today need to have a biblical literacy that helps them fall in love with a Savior who has a wonderful purpose for them and can help them through the difficult life journey ahead. When they understand their faith as alive each day in every action and choice, they will be compelled to share it and grow in it. I'm very excited to see the direction the students are going at LCC. So many will stay connected with a church where ever they are in the future, as they commit to a life long pursuit and worship of God. Appreciate your leadership in the lives of our kids, Chris.

General Affirmation:

The excitement I see in the children brings me joy!

I think we have an amazing youth ministry. I have watch it grow from strength to strength since Chris has come to our church. Chris does an amazing job.

I know that it is frustrating at times the lack of commitment in the part of some of the youth, but we, as adults, need to be faithful in prayer and action to reach out to the youth. We need to live by example and show God's love to them. Hopefully, In time God's love will touch them in their hearts! I believe we need to speak the truth though and hold them accountable as well. .... That's what relationship and connecting as a family is all about. My favorite verse is Galatians 6:9, "let us not get tired of doing what is right, for in time, we will reap a harvest of blessings if we don't get discouraged and give up! " I know how much of a difference it would've been for me if an adult from my church growing up had invested some time into me. I want to be that for these youth and want others to come alongside in the journey too!

Chris, I can not thank God or you enough for your crazed, driven pursuit of our students as well as myself as an adult leader. I love you. Little kiss little hug, Kiss Kiss Hug.

So happy that even kids who have graduated are still connected to each other!

I appreciate your energy, process, and vision in support of our community

Our church is hugely blessed with Chris Lyons and his whole family . His great communication about what is going on in Youth Ministry is so helpful for those of us who don't have youth. If I had teens in my family I would feel that they are safe doing things with Chris and the other adults, that they are hearing the Good News of Jesus and learning how to bring that Good News into their daily life. I appreciate Chris' determination to allow our youth to be involved with homeless people, with kids with special needs, and with other churches' youth.

I think our youth problem is heading in the right direction

L.C. Church youth group is the best we have ever experienced! I hope you continue to do exactly what your doing building string families and young adults that have a heat for God.

This church is doing things the right way...It's been a process over the past 3 years, but God is so good and the fruits of the labor are beginning to ripen!

I appreciate the way that we try to reach out and make everyone feel welcome.

We are so thankful for the passion that has been ignited and Christian education our kids have had ! Love the family it has created in Christ ! We love that the youth having the opportunity to connect with multiple generations and participate in small groups . Love the kids in worship ,

It is really inspiring to see their gifts being developed, their energy and love shared through many experienced as they mature in faith, growth and development in maturity .

I personally love the way the congregation appreciates the youth in our church and support them. Especially our Sr. Pastor John Williams.

just keep working God's plan!!

So thankful that we have a growing youth ministry. A strong youth group was part of my past and I know the difference it made in my life. Moments of dedication are still clear in my mind and soul, after many, many years.

Keep the great exposure to the congregation as a whole.,The youth song team, power points, students sharing. The more the general congregation sees the kids and experiences

their enthusiasm, leadership and commitment to Christ, the stronger their support will be. Prayer partners is also another way to connect them.

Truly blessed that every student is encouraged to participate even the shy or students that have disabilities

We have a great program that is thriving and growing. Humor is welcome and the kids have fun.

Sometimes we tell jokes that may be misinterpreted by the students and gives them permission to tease another student. It is all meant to be harmless but can translate to how the students treat one another outside of that setting. It can sometimes get out of hand.

#### Misc. Thoughts:

There are times when it seems that the Youth ministry is driving the church congregation.

#### Meeting Needs of the Youth:

Building a support team similar but smaller like what you have been working on with (student name) would be a powerful life changer in the lives of kids with an absent parent for some reason.

Sometimes a parent may be physically present but have extreme addictions that leave a teen feeling abandoned.

## **Research Report Details – “Ready or Not” Survey**

### Evaluating the scores.....

On a scale of 1 (low) – 4 (high), the “score” represents the perceived “strength of faith.”

- Higher than 3.25 – Encouraging
- Between 3 – 3.25 – Positive
- Between 2.5 – 3 – Fair
- Below 2.5 – Needs Focus

The “gap” is the difference between the test groups – and the different color code shows which group scored stronger.

### Further Notes:

Between the two groups, it would appear that a “gap” of a SIGNIFICANT difference between “prepped” (GP) students and non-prepped (NP) students would be greater than .5. There were no such “gaps” in this study.

All of these students were “ACTIVE” in youth group as seniors in high school and this appears to be a very good thing that leads to stronger faith.

Other factors (aside from “prep”) have an impact in their responses.

- Family Faith, Involvement in Faith Community at College, Relationships of Accountability, others?

### Additional Feedback:

If there were ONE thing that most prepared your faith for life after graduation, what would it be?

### Personal Faith/Devotion:

- Deep knowledge of The Word
- The fact that God has set a path way for us and that he wants us to fallow it. Eben though we may not know what that path is he wants us to relay on him for the the answers to what to do on this path
- That Jesus would walk with me even through my hardest times.
- Knowing the answers to the questions most people not affiliated with the church often answer. Also going with that idea is being able to speak to non Christians about Christianity in a way they they do not feel judged and are welcomed by the church through me.
- Despite what I do or my decisions, I still have faith and trust in God. There are decisions that I have made that reflect that belief and faith.
- Faith
- Memorizing verses and reading the bible
- My trust in God



#### Peer Relationships/Accountability/Fellowship:

- Support from peers
- The foundation. Without a solid footing on what I believe in and what I stand for I would be very much lost.
- Encouragement from family and friends (also in Family Faith)
- Meeting with other Christians.
- Knowing that I have a whole community of God-fearing people who support me and are willing to help and take care of me whenever necessary as well as challenging me to grow.
- My friends/mentors that stuck with me and really committed to knowing and loving me as a person.
- Conversing with others about what it would be like.
- My accountability partner and the relationships I built through youth group.
- The strong support of my youth ministry throughout high school, along with my core group of friends and small group to help me confirm my faith.
- Knowing people will always be there
- Accountability partners

#### Continued Involvement in Church/Ministry:

- Have a plan to stay strong in your faith. I am now helping out as a youth leader at both father's house and valley Christian. I have not started at valley but will be soon. What you could maybe do is make a plan. Stick with a study group. There is a group that fathers house that I go to for just for people 18-25 years in age. It is a group that Austin Nordstrom a pastor at fathers house holds. He also does a group called the vine. These sessions are held on Monday and Tuesday nights. I'd love to help.

#### Youth Group/Ministry Experience during High School:

- The ability during middle/high school to get many basic theological questions (is there a God, who is said God, why is the Bible true, etc.) for myself so that my faith had a personal foundation before I was out on my own.
- Receiving the gospel in a correct and true way. Many of my friends are struggling because they are having to re-learn their faith.
- Life-long roots in Christianity (also in Family Faith)
- The Monastery trip! Having that sense of calm there was awesome, and it was nice to do nothing except listen to God for awhile.
- Youth group
- High School Youth Group

#### College/Grad Prep Classes:

- College prep class
- Calvary U every month. Learning the things to do right when I got to college (finding a campus ministry that I liked best and staying with it) and how to stick with my faith throughout college has helped me more than I ever thought. I also typed down key points to remember in my phone so that when I got to college, I

had a guideline right there with me to help me grow in my faith. Having the different ministries and churches email was wonderful as well. With that I knew where to go and didn't have to search for churches when I got here. I was a stress reliever.

- The once a month prep for college class my church gave
- The college prep group that was held. We acquired accountability partners that help talk about what is going on in our lives and hold us accountable for growing in our faith during college.

Family Faith:

- My family and my Father especially. Thus, my faith is a rock on solid ground.
- My grandpa's advice
- Encouragement from family and friends (also in Peer Relationships/Accountability/Fellowship)
- Life-long roots in Christianity (also in Youth Group/Ministry Experience during High School)

**The Questions:**

**#1 – My faith in Jesus Christ gives me a GREAT SENSE of purpose and meaning in life.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	2.44% 1	0.00% 0	39.02% 16	58.54% 24	41	3.54

**HIGHEST RANK – 1<sup>st</sup> rank – Encouraging!**

**Compare GAP:** Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .14

**Thoughts:**

60% Strongly agreed! – **BE PRECISE**

0 1 2 3 4

**#2 – I make most of my moral decisions WITHOUT really relying on my faith.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	20.00% 8	67.50% 27	10.00% 4	2.50% 1	40	3.05

**5<sup>th</sup> rank – Positive**

**Compare GAP:** Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .19

**Thoughts:**

Are they being honest?

0 1 2 3 4

**#3 – I OFTEN turn to God to deal with the natural loneliness that comes during this season of life.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	2.50% 1	20.00% 8	45.00% 18	32.50% 13	40	3.08

**4<sup>th</sup> rank – Positive**

**Compare GAP:** Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .01

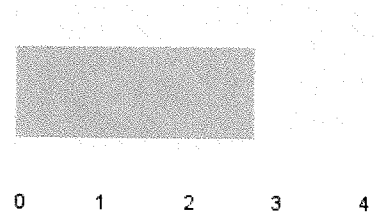
0 1 2 3 4

**#4 – It is RARE for my conversations with others to have anything to do with God.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	4.88% 2	65.85% 27	26.83% 11	2.44% 1	41	2.73

8<sup>th</sup> rank – Fair

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .28

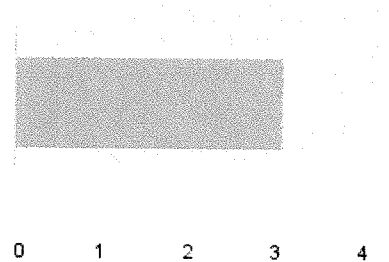


**#5 – My decisions about my future career are VERY MUCH influenced as a calling from God.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	2.44% 1	17.07% 7	48.78% 20	31.71% 13	41	3.10

3<sup>rd</sup> rank – Positive

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .25



**#6 – My commitment to prayer and reading of scripture is a greater STRUGGLE in this season of life than it was in high school.**

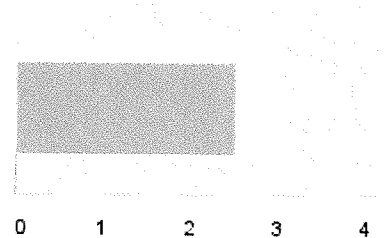
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	21.95% 9	24.39% 10	36.59% 15	17.07% 7	41	2.51

9<sup>th</sup> rank – Fair – Honesty!

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .33

Thoughts:

FAULTY Question – not really measuring “strong faith” but instead an “honest faith”



**#7 – Consistent participation in a church or campus ministry is a VITAL part of my life.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	7.32% 3	29.27% 12	31.71% 13	31.71% 13	41	2.88

6<sup>th</sup> rank – Fair

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .00

Thoughts:

For all this is a challenge

0 1 2 3 4

**#8 – The speed and stress of life makes it incredibly DIFFICULT to trust God in real-life ways.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	29.27% 12	26.83% 11	41.46% 17	2.44% 1	41	2.83

7<sup>th</sup> rank – Fair

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .23

Thoughts:

FAULTY Question – not really measuring “strong faith” but instead an “honest faith”

0 1 2 3 4

**#9 – I am vulnerable with and sharpened by a Christian accountability partner(s) that I meet with REGULARLY.**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	17.07% 7	31.71% 13	36.59% 15	14.63% 6	41	2.49

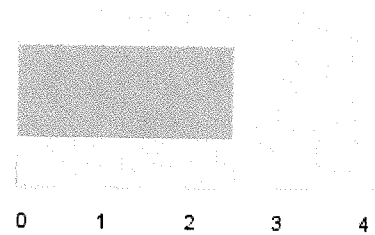
10<sup>th</sup> rank – Needs Focus

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .12

Thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_

Hardest for all

**#10 – Intellectual attacks on my faith in academic situations (or just attitudes about Christianity in ordinary conversations) NEGATIVELY affect my confidence in God.**



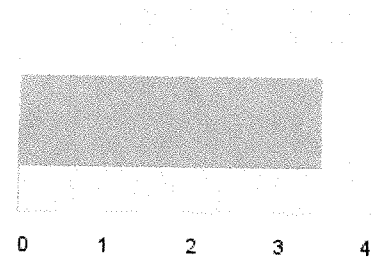
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Total	Weighted Average
(no label)	51.22% 21	46.34% 19	2.44% 1	0.00% 0	41	3.49

2<sup>nd</sup> rank – Encouraging!

Compare GAP: Grad Prep or Non-Grad Prep – .02

Thoughts: \_\_\_\_\_

Is it just too early in their academic career...or ?



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